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## Education Leadership Review List of Reviewers (February 2009 Issue)

### Education Leadership Review, Volume 10, Number 1, February 2009

#### List of Reviewers

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Babo, G.(February 2009) Principal Evaluation and Leadership Standards: Using the ISLLC 2008 “functions” as a Perspective into the Evaluation of Building Principals by New Jersey Chief School Administrators in Suburban School Districts

The primary objective of this project was to provide a more detailed description along with “real time” information to the community of educational administration preparation programs in the State of New Jersey as to what are considered to be the critical elements, skills and competencies current Chief School Administrators (CSA) in the state deem important when evaluating school building leaders. Additionally, the secondary objective was to determine the operational effectiveness of the ISLLC standards as they are understood and applied by New Jersey school superintendents. Using a quantitative survey design, the results of this descriptive study, based on a limited sample of suburban Chief School Administrators, suggest that, in general, suburban CSAs believe that student and staff safety, child advocacy, strategic planning, ethical behavior, collaboration, trust building, nurturing learning and instruction, sustaining high expectations, maintaining and sustaining family relationships and understanding the legal aspects of decision making are essential elements to be considered when developing summative evaluations for their district’s principals.



**Note:** This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of education administration. In addition to publication in the Connexions Content Commons, this module is published in the [International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation](#), Volume 3, Number 2 (July - September, 2008). Formatted and edited in Connexions by Theodore Creighton, Virginia Tech.

## Introduction

There does not appear to be much support in the literature for discussing and exploring the development of a comprehensive and reliable system of principal evaluation (Rosenberg, 2001; Catano & Stronge, 2006). Primarily, it seems that in most states, principals are more often than not evaluated based on their students’ success, or lack thereof, on the federally mandated and state implemented standardized tests (Ediger, 2002). This myopic view of a principal’s overall effectiveness as a leader not only seems limited and restricted but also shortsighted. Since so much has been written in the recent past on teacher evaluation and its impact on student achievement, a concerted effort that focuses on principal evaluation would be the next logical, evolutionary step in the discussion about improving schools.

In a series of interviews with principals and superintendents concerning the evaluation process, Davis and Hensley (2000) reported that the formats and processes used in evaluation often vary from district to district. They also found that many principals did not find the evaluation process to be useful in forwarding their professional expertise and more often than not, were influenced by outside political forces. Both authors suggested a collaborative approach that not only identifies criteria but also defines the process.

Amsterdam, Johnson, Monrad and Tonnsen (2005), in collaboration with a myriad of statewide stakeholders, successfully assisted with the development of a comprehensive system for principal evaluation for the State of South Carolina. Central to this discussion and collaboration were district leaders and current practicing principals. Critical to the development of this system was an agreed upon criteria, which evolved from actual practice and current State and National standards.

The State of Illinois, in an effort to systemically address the issue of a consistent process of principal evaluation, passed legislation requiring the annual evaluation of one-year and multi-year contracted building principals. Adherence to this new law is mandated and strictly enforced. This responsibility logically falls

directly to the district's chief school administrator. The evaluation process must specify the individual's weaknesses and strengths and is aligned to the state's standards for school leaders (Dutton, Selbee & Schwartz, 2006). Similar work, although not necessarily legislated, is happening in many states across the country relying on both state and national leadership standards to establish baseline performance levels (Catano & Strong, 2006).

What can be deduced from these previous reports is that an agreed upon criteria and procedures are needed and essential to the process and the development of a reliable and effective model of principal evaluation. Continued study and discussion on this topic is critical for every state, particularly at the school district level. Central to this ongoing discussion are the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996), a set of comprehensive leadership standards that have been influencing public school leadership since 1996 (Van Meter & McMinn, 2001). These standards have recently been revised and updated to reflect a more practical, operational and functional, rather than theoretical, approach to local building leadership and are now labeled the Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008 (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2007).

A majority of university administrator preparation programs have developed their curricula on this set of national standards, commonly known as the ISLLC standards, in order to prepare their students for the business of leading schools and successfully passing individual state licensure exams (Ellett, 1999; Latham & Pearlman, 1999; Lindle, Stalion & Young, 2004; Murphy, 2002; Murphy, 2005; Murphy, Yff & Shipman, 2000). If administrator preparation programs are going to continue to develop their curriculums based in and around these standards, then a better understanding of how these standards are actually applied to the summative evaluation process of building principals in the real world of public schools by chief school administrators is a necessity for these programs and their students (Barnet, 2004).

The primary objective of this project was to provide a more detailed description, along with "real time" information to the community of New Jersey educational administration preparation programs, as to what are considered to be the critical elements, skills and competencies current Chief School Administrators in the State of New Jersey (NJ) believe to be important when constructing summative evaluations for their school district's building principals. A secondary objective was to attempt to distinguish between what are the essential, as opposed to the important, leadership functions and job responsibilities of a building principal as defined by the ISLLC standards and determined by New Jersey Chief School Administrators through the summative evaluation process.

The original research question addressed was: **Are certain ISLLC "functions" deemed more important than others by New Jersey Chief School Administrators when developing a summative evaluation for their building principals?**

## **Methodology**

### **The Survey and Data Collection**

The research design for this study was descriptive in nature utilizing survey research as the primary data collection tool. The survey was developed using the Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008 (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2007) as the content model; specifically the "functions" for each standard. The ISLLC 2008 standards provide an operative content and language associated with what building principals need to know and do to be successful leaders (Latham & Pearlman, 1999). Survey content validity was obtained through expert review.

The on-line survey consisted of two parts. Part A was a 66-item "forced response" multiple choice questionnaire that attempted to gauge New Jersey CSAs attitudes and perceptions to what is important to consider when developing a summative evaluation for his school district's building principals.

Each of the corresponding ISLLC 2008 Standards' functions was used as the basis for item construction. When an ISLLC function identified several variables within the text, a separate item was constructed for each variable

in an attempt to gauge the importance of each specific variable. ISLLC Standard I, Function A states, “Collaboratively develop and implement a shared vision and mission” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2007, p.1); this function then served as the basis for two survey items - 1) Collaboratively develop a shared vision and/or mission; and 2) Collaboratively implement a shared vision and/or mission. The survey items themselves were preceded by the general statement, “A principal should be able to...”

The 66-item multiple choice questionnaire was a series of “forced response” questions that reflected a range from 4 – essential to 1 – insignificant, concerning the level of importance a particular ISLLC function serves when developing a summative evaluation for building principals. The range of total response scores could then be scaled from 66 (implying that all of the ISLLC 2008 functions are insignificant when developing a summative evaluation for building principals ) to 264 (implying that all of the ISLLC 2008 functions are essential when developing a summative evaluation for building principals). Part B of the on-line survey consisted of a series of basic demographic informational questions related to the participant’s particular working environment.

### **Population Surveyed**

The subjects for this research design came from a convenience sample of New Jersey School Superintendents, also identified as Chief School Administrators and henceforth referred to as CSAs, from the current population of approximately 612 CSAs in the State of New Jersey. Since an on-line survey tool was used to collect data, an e-mail list was developed from the New Jersey Association of School Administrators 2008 Membership Directory and Buying Guide (NJASA, 2008) for all currently registered NJASA members, of which there are approximately 525. An initial correspondence eliciting participation in the research was blanket e-mailed to this list of electronic addresses on June 2, 2008. Contained in the soliciting e-mail memo was an explanation of the research along with a link to the survey site. Upon the initial mailing, approximately 50 responses were returned indicating a “failure to deliver” message. This resulted in the initial e-mail being received by approximately 475 NJASA member e-mail addresses. A second e-mail correspondence containing a shorter message was forwarded two weeks later. On July 18, 2008, the on-line survey site was deactivated and all completed surveys tallied. Fifty-two participants completed the survey for a response rate of approximately 11%.

In the State of New Jersey, school districts are categorized as either urban or suburban with a special classification of “Abbott” for those districts that meet specific criteria for a percentage of the population that are identified as low income. School districts classified as “Abbott” districts are provided with extra state funding to supplement educational programs due to a lack of financial equity when compared to the state’s more affluent districts. These school districts generally have the largest educational, community and social problems to surmount. Of the CSAs involved in this study, none from “Abbott” classified districts responded. The majority of the participants, 92%, were from suburban school districts, 4% were from urban districts and 4% of the respondents did not identify his district type.

The State of New Jersey uses an additional coding structure to determine and classify each school district’s financial potential, defined as “District Factor Group” or DFG. Based on this specific coding it was determined that 25% of the survey respondents are currently CSAs in what would be considered affluent/wealthy school districts, 12% from upper middle class school districts, 12% from average middle to lower middle class (blue collar) school districts and the remaining 51% were equally distributed among the other 10 DFG factor ratings.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Demographic Findings**

Regrettably, only 52 current working CSAs participated in this research study from a potential population of approximately 475. As had been mentioned previously, this accounted for approximately an 11% participation rate. This low participation rate can be attributed to three potential explanations.

First, the initial participation e-mail was distributed in early June, a busy time of the academic year, considering that most districts in the State of New Jersey are gearing up for the close of the official school year. The follow-up e-mail came two weeks later and conditions would not have changed much; in fact, they most likely grew more hectic.

Second, many school districts now employ filtering software as a security method to protect student and staff populations from receiving unwarranted solicitation from private web addresses and/or to guard against student and staff users from accessing unwanted websites. This fact alone could have eradicated numerous e-mail deliveries to potential participants without the researcher being made aware.

Finally, the low participation rate could also speak to the overwhelming nature of the job of the superintendent. Many CSAs are so busy with the daily operations and responsibilities of running a school district that participation in any research project is a luxury not afforded them because of the massive demand on their time.

Although more males (34) participated in the study than females (18), 65% and 35% respectively, this represented a more equitable breakdown by gender than is currently represented in the State of New Jersey. Currently, females represent 22% of the state's superintendents while males represent 78% (Edmunds, 2007).

A majority of the participants (64%) hold terminal degrees and the majority (50%) have 6 – 10 years of classroom experience. Additionally, 54% claimed 21 or more years of administrative experience. Coupled with the fact that 82% served as a building principal at one time or another during their administrative career, this sample, although small, could be considered a well seasoned and experienced field of public school administrators.

One delimitation, however, to inferring the survey results to the at-large population of CSAs is that a majority of the respondents came from average to above average middle class, suburban school communities, as was previously mentioned under Population Surveyed. A representative sample of respondents from urban and inner city school districts was negligible. This limits the possible conclusions and implications that can be drawn with regard to the evaluation of New Jersey school building principals from the results of this survey to primarily average, middle class suburban school environments.

### **Survey Findings**

The purpose of the survey, and this project in general, was twofold - to acquire a sense of what is important to the evaluation process of New Jersey public school building principals as perceived by their administrative superiors using the ISLLC standards as the operative content model; and to attempt to distinguish between what are the essential, as opposed to the important, leadership functions and job responsibilities of a building principal as defined by the ISLLC standards and determined by New Jersey Chief School Administrators through the summative evaluation process. However, since a majority of responses were from suburban chief school administrators, all results and potential conclusions can only be inferred to school building principals employed in suburban school districts.

A cursory review of participant responses indicated that all of the standards and their respective functions are considered "essential" or "important" to CSAs when developing summative evaluations for their district's principals. In fact, the total mean score for all survey questions was 223 with a standard deviation of 19.29. Since a survey total score of 264 indicates a selection of "essential" for each survey item, the mean score obtained indicates that all respondents believed these functions to be important when developing a principal's summative evaluation.

Responses to the survey questions obtained median scores ranging from 4.00 to 3.00 and standard deviations ranging from .19 and .75. This relatively small degree of variability indicates that the median scores are a strong and reliable indicator of central tendency (Witte & Witte, 2007).

These previously identified quantitative observations suggest a level of operational credibility for each of the ISLLC standards and their subsequent functions. Upon closer review, however, some of the standards and their respective functions appeared to be more important than others.

The footprint for ISLLC Standard 1 is: An education leader promotes the success of every student by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders (CCSSO, 2007). Seventy-seven per cent of the respondents believed that the element of function 1A which requires building leaders to collaboratively implement a shared vision and mission (CCSSO, 2007, p.1) is essential. That aspect of function 1C which states, create and implement plans to achieve goals (CCSSO, 2007, p.1), is believed to be an important skill a principal needs to be able to implement in his/her respective school community by 81% of the respondents. Conversely, only 52% of the respondents believe that the ability to promote organizational learning (CCSSO, 2007, p.1), a component of function 1C, is an essential function of the building principal. These results suggest that suburban CSAs not only place an importance on vision but the implementation and realization of that vision by their district's principals.

The footprint for ISLLC Standard 2 is: An education leader promotes the success of every student by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth (CCSSO, 2007). Function 2D, the capacity to supervise instruction (CCSSO, 2007, p.2) is considered by 73% of suburban CSAs to be an essential part of the principalship. Inherent to this task are those aspects of function 2A which addresses the principals' abilities to nurture and sustain a culture of trust (CCSSO, 2007, p.2), which 77% of the participants rated as essential and to nurture and sustain a culture of learning and high expectations (CCSSO, 2007, p.2), which 73% of the respondents believed essential. Additionally, the response rate for function 2H, which speaks directly to the use of technology in the classroom, was somewhat surprising. Only 31% of the respondents thought it essential that principals promote the use of the most effective and appropriate technologies to support teaching (CCSSO, 2007, p.2).

The footprint for ISLLC Standard 3 is: An education leader promotes the success of every student by ensuring management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment (CCSSO, 2007). As might be expected, function 3C, which directly responds to the safety and welfare of both students and staff, was by far what suburban CSAs considered to be the most essential task a principal needs to be able to accomplish and sustain. Ninety-six percent of the respondents believe that the principals' ability to promote and protect the welfare and safety of students (CCSSO, 2007, p.3) is essential and 90% felt similarly about the safety of the staff. Conversely, evaluating the management and operational systems (CCSSO, 2007, p.3) an aspect of function 3A, is considered to be the least essential skill, as only 19 % rated this skill as essential. This is a curious juxtaposition of values that might be better explained through a qualitative approach.

The footprint for ISLLC Standard 4 is: An education leader promotes the success of every student by collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources (CCSSO, 2007). Beginning with this standard the variability in participants' responses concerning specific functions starts to increase. The ability to clearly delineate essential functions becomes more difficult. This quite possibly suggests the influence of the political climate and community environment of the respondents.

The aspect of function 4C which asks principals to build positive relationships with families and caregivers (CCSSO, 2007, p.4) garnered 61% of the essential response rating, indicating that the principals' capability to build positive family relationships is an essential skill that needs to be addressed. The facility to sustain positive relationships with families and caregivers (CCSSO, 2007, p.4) is considered essential by 56% of the respondents. The ability to promote understanding, appreciation, and use of the community's diverse intellectual resources (CCSSO, 2007, p.4), a facet of function 4B, is only considered essential by 19% of the participants.

The footprint for ISLLC Standard 5 is: An education leader promotes the success of every student by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner (CCSSO, 2007). Analysis of the participants' individual responses reveals a level of variability which is quite large. However, that aspect of function 5B which addresses the principals' aptitude to model principles of ethical behavior (CCSSO, 2007, p. 5) stands out as the most essential characteristic a CSA wants to witness in their principals. Since this function is at the core of ISLLC Standard 5 it is no surprise that 79% of suburban CSAs thought this to be essential. Coming in a distant



second was that aspect of function 5D which asks principals to consider the potential legal consequences of decision making (CCSSO, 2007, p. 5). Sixty percent of the respondents thought this to be an essential skill. Interesting to note is that this function specifically addresses the legal aspects of a principal's decisions. This might suggest a regional phenomenon considering that the State of New Jersey is perceived by many, including those who reside within it, as overly litigious.

The footprint for ISLLC Standard 6 is: An education leader promotes the success of every student by understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context (CCSSO, 2007). A principal's capability to be an advocate for children (CCSSO, 2007, p. 5), a component of function 6A, acquired a rating of "essential" by 87% of the participants. However, the capacity to act to influence state and/or national decisions affecting student learning (CCSSO, 2007, p. 6), an aspect of function 6B, obtained a rating of "essential" by only 4% of the respondents. In fact, 46% of the respondents felt this skill to be only somewhat important to insignificant. These results seem to suggest that the principal's talent for influencing both state and national decisions concerning student learning is not considered that important by suburban CSAs when evaluating principals.

In an effort to synthesize and consolidate those functions deemed to be most important or "essential" to the evaluation of suburban New Jersey building principals as perceived by suburban CSAs, Table 1 was constructed. Table 1 lists each "essential" function and its corresponding ISLLC Standard footprint in rank order to outline a better visual representation of what current suburban New Jersey principals need to be sure to address in fulfilling their obligations and responsibilities as a building leader.

E – Essential (4); I – Important (3); SI – Somewhat Important (2); IN – Insignificant (1)

|    | Survey Item  | ISLLC Standard & Function | E   | I   | SI | IN | m* | Median | SD   |
|----|--|---------------------------|-----|-----|----|----|----|--------|------|
| 32 | Promote and protect the welfare and safety of students | III - 3c                  | 96% | 4%  | 0% | 0% | 0% | 4.00   | .194 |
| 33 | Promote and protect the welfare and safety of staff    | III - 3c                  | 90% | 8%  | 0% | 0% | 2% | 4.00   | .379 |
| 61 | Be an advocate for children                            | VI - 6a                   | 87% | 13% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 4.00   | .345 |
| 7  | Implement a plan to achieve the school's goals         | I - 1c                    | 81% | 19% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 4.00   | .397 |
| 53 | Model principles of                                    | V - 5b                    | 79% | 17% | 4% | 0% | 0% | 4.00   | .519 |

|    |  |         |     |     |    |    |    |      |      |
|----|--|---------|-----|-----|----|----|----|------|------|
|    | ethical behavior   |         |     |     |    |    |    |      |      |
| 2  | Collaboratively implement a shared vision and/or mission     | I - 1a  | 77% | 21% | 0% | 0% | 2% | 4.00 | .415 |
| 12 | Nurture and sustain a culture of trust                       | II - 2a | 77% | 21% | 2% | 0% | 0% | 4.00 | .479 |
| 13 | Nurture and sustain a culture of learning                    | II - 2a | 73% | 25% | 2% | 0% | 0% | 4.00 | .498 |
| 18 | Supervise Instruction  | II - 2d | 73% | 25% | 2% | 0% | 0% | 4.00 | .498 |
| 14 | Nurture and sustain a culture of high expectations           | II - 2a | 73% | 21% | 4% | 0% | 2% | 4.00 | .540 |
| 44 | Build positive relationships with families and caregivers    | IV - 4c | 61% | 37% | 2% | 0% | 0% | 4.00 | .533 |
| 57 | Consider the potential legal consequences of decision-making | V - 5d  | 60% | 36% | 2% | 0% | 2% | 4.00 | .536 |
| 45 | Sustain positive relationships with families and caregivers  | IV - 4c | 56% | 38% | 4% | 0% | 2% | 4.00 | .578 |

#### Rank Order of the *Essential* ISLLC Standard Functions

(\*m = percentage of missing responses)

The results outlined in Table 1 suggest that safety, child advocacy, strategic planning, ethical behavior, collaboration, trust building, nurturing learning and instruction, sustaining high expectations, maintaining and sustaining family relationships and understanding the legal aspects of decision making are the primary essential elements that need to be adequately addressed by suburban building principals in the State of New Jersey in order to be considered successful by their respective CSAs.

This is a daunting list to be sure, however, an immediately more workable list of criteria than might be previously anticipated. Undeniably, all of the new functions for the ISLLC 2008 Standards are essential for the success of every educational community, but identification and prioritizing what could be considered the most

essential is important for the continued development and success of every new and young principal (Crow, 2006; Davis & Hensley, 2000; Waters & Kingston, 2005).

## Conclusions

The list of prioritized ISLLC functions in Table 1 suggests that current New Jersey suburban CSAs might rank order the ISLLC Standard's footprints in the following manner:

1. An educational leader should promote the success of every student by ensuring management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment (Standard III).
2. An educational leader should promote the success of every student by understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context (Standard VI).
3. An educational leader should promote the success of every student by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders (Standard I).
4. An educational leader should promote the success of every student by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner (Standard V).
5. An educational leader should promote the success of every student by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth (Standard II).
6. An educational leader should promote the success of every student by collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources (Standard IV).

This prioritized ranking of the ISLLC Standard footprints based on each standard's ranking of essential functions is an interesting point of departure from the current discussion in the field, which implies that a principal's primary focus should be on classroom instruction. ISLLC Standard II, which directly responds to this responsibility, is rated fifth out of a list of six. This is an unusual circumstance considering current thought in this age of student achievement and accountability as it relates to the principal as an instructional leader (Quinn, 2002).

When one looks at this ranking in a holistic sense one sees a theme that emerges where, not surprisingly, student wellness and advocacy are the priority. This has been a time honored tradition and expectation of the principalship since its inception. Second to these time-honored responsibilities is the principal's ability to set a clear vision and path for everyone in the educational community and to act in an ethical manner. The role of instructional leader and collegial facilitator are ranked surprisingly at the bottom of this list. This is not to imply that these functions are not important elements associated with the principalship but possibly not as important to current suburban CSAs as one might be led to think based on current thought in the field.

It could be surmised that current suburban CSAs, at least in New Jersey, are quite possibly holding school building principals to the same set of standards on their summative evaluations that they themselves were held to when they were site administrators. Since the field of administrator preparation is so focused on the ISLLC standards, understanding how our graduates are going to be evaluated in the field in relation to these standards could quite possibly assist administrator preparation programs to more comprehensively prepare students for the realities of the practice in the real world of work.

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## Mining Best Practice Language as a Catalyst for School Reform: The Community Engagement Goldmine



**Note:** This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of education administration. This Volume 10, Number 1, is archived in the **International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation (IJELP)**, (Supplemental Link). Authors: **Hal L. Holoman and Peggy H. Yates, East Carolina University**

### Introduction

At the outset of the 21st century, a confluence of social, economic, and political forces pose daunting new challenges to the nation's continued vitality and make clear the need for higher education to assume new responsibilities. There is little question that higher education must be among the most important intellectual and creative resources assembled to address an array of critical challenges confronting society—including the sustainability of natural resources; the provision of health care for all in a growing, aging population; and the renewal of economic vitality across a wide demographic range, which entails helping more working adults acquire higher-level skills and knowledge, instilling core human values, and strengthening social structures to ensure that future generations experience lives of justice, equity, and fulfillment. Higher education must organize its resources for increased responsiveness to, and engagement with, society's core challenges in the century ahead. The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2008)

Seemingly insurmountable odds...high stakes...a hint of flattery...dire circumstances with gripping urgency. But is it compelling enough? What will it take for the academy and its members to collectively acknowledge and respond to such public—noble, practical, interpersonal, and multigenerational—purposes? And what if members of the academy bravely respond to even one of these core challenges—what would it look like—and how would other members of the community respond?

If the chivalrous tone above does not stir to action, perhaps the increasing waves of accountability will. Accountability trends that begin with legislators and other citizens asking: How is the research in your university helping the community? Are you applying your research findings to improve our community? How is our local community benefiting from the university's presence? Should the university define success in terms of local community success?

## **Community Engagement Defined**

While some members of the academy deliberate between “the rock and the hard place”—significant community engagement efforts in higher education are being encouraged and supported across the country. In December 2006, the Carnegie Foundation introduced a voluntary Community Engagement classification, and highlighted the “substantial efforts invested by participating institutions.” For the purpose of institutional review, the Carnegie Foundation defines community engagement as “the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.” The value of community engagement and its scholarship varies among institutions. While some colleges and universities encourage and reward community engagement and its scholarship—other institutions continue to view it more through the traditional lens of service. These different institutional perspectives can and will have significant implications on a faculty member's—especially a tenure-track faculty member's—research agenda.

As a recently tenured professor and a current tenure-track professor, we offer our experiences and discoveries from an ongoing community engagement research project between a regional university and a small rural county in the southeastern United States. The goal of this community engagement initiative is to make purposeful connections between research, best practices, community needs, and community goals. This paper provides the framework for the research we conducted—and the lessons we learned along the way.

**Universities, it seems to me, should model something for students besides individual excellence...They should model social excellence as well as personal achievement...If institutions that purport to educate young people don't embody society's cherished ideals—community, cooperation, harmony, love—then what young people will learn will be the standards institutions do embody: competition, hierarchy, busyness, and isolation.** Jane Thompkins, Duke University

## **Community Engagement: University Level**

What does it look like when a large university and a small rural county form a successful partnership that constitutes an authentic community engagement model? How do they work together for the good of both parties? What types of projects should occur in such a community engagement model? These questions and many more were raised in the initial meeting between a large southeastern university and representatives from a small rural county in the eastern part of North Carolina in October 2006. During that meeting both parties agreed to formalize a partnership entitled the University/County Community Engagement Model.

Community development constituted the core value for this community engagement model; however, educational advancement for the county was incorporated as well. As a vital partner the university pledged to provide support by granting release time for faculty members from various colleges within the university who then committed to partner with an agency and/or an institution in the county. Once these individual partnerships were established, numerous community development projects emerged.

Collaborative projects ranged from a construction apprenticeship program,



to the provision of walking trail lights in a local city, to a Best Practice Language research study within the county school system.

### **Community Engagement: Professor Level**

The collaborative projects quickly commenced among various groups of faculty members and local agencies/institutions within the county. As two faculty members from the College of Education, we teamed with the local school system in hopes of conducting a valid and useful research study for all of its stakeholders. The first step of our collaborative project consisted of an initial meeting with the superintendent and his administrative team. Without any prior discussion with school personnel and an anecdotal review of system-wide student achievement data, we arrived for the meeting equipped with a complete outline of a possible research study. Yes, we were prepared, however, it did not take us long to discover that this approach was not the proper design for a collaborative project.

After much discussion about the needs of the school system, we humbly acknowledged our presumptiveness and abandoned our predetermined “well written” proposal. Instead, we pledged to meet with individual school principals to design a collaborative and valuable, “on-site”, “school-specific” research study—and ensured all administrators that the project would not interfere with instructional time. The researchers quickly discovered that an effective community engagement project meant walking alongside your partners, talking with them about their needs, and designing a project together that would enhance their community and its people (i.e. principals, teachers, students, and parents).

### **A Collaborative Research Study--Uncovering the Best Practice Language in a Rural School System**

While conducting the individual meetings with principals, a Best Practice Language (BPL) research study evolved. The BPL research study would involve every teacher within the school system, thus giving a voice to each of them. Throughout the next year, the researchers visited the county

weekly to design and implement the research study components. The project included visits to principals, communication with the superintendent and assistant superintendent, the polling of teachers, interviewing local experts and sharing the results of the study with every teacher and administrator at each school. In order to accomplish all the steps of the research study a BPL Acquisition Model was designed by the researchers and implemented within the five schools in the county school system. The following section provides a detailed outline of the BPL Acquisition Model.

## **BPL Acquisition Model**

### **Step One**

Major Issues Poll (MIP)--We asked teachers from each school to identify three to five major issues that were impacting teaching and learning at their school. The researchers gathered this information by using a MIP.

### **Step Two**

Local Expert Poll (LEP)—After tabulating the MIP information and identifying the major issues at each school, a LEP was conducted. The LEP asked all faculty members from each school to list the names of people on their faculty who were considered to be resident experts in dealing with the major issues identified.

### **Step Three**

Scenario Design—Researchers designed five scenarios for each major issue that described possible classroom/school situations aligned to the particular issue. Each scenario focused on “putting a face” on the major issue to make it as personal, practical—and real—as possible. The scenarios were designed to capture a participant’s Language of Practice, and therefore each scenario ended with the same question: What do you say?

## **Step Four**

Data Gathering (Interviews and Literature Review)--Once the local experts were determined, the researchers interviewed those individuals to capture their LoP associated with their particular issue. A literature review for each major issue was also conducted.

## **Step Five**

Analyze Data--Once the interviews were transcribed, and the literature review was completed, the researchers read the responses and noticed patterns among the both the participants' LoP and the language of researchers and scholars. Upon further analysis and coding, these patterns produced categories such as words of care, words of accountability, words of hope, words of guidance and many others.

## **Step 6**

Present Findings and Encourage BPL Adoption—Researchers aligned the language found in the literature with the LoP examples from the local experts and presented these findings as Best Practice Language (BPL) to the faculty at each school. Researchers offered the BPL findings as “raw gold” that could be used and refined by all faculty members.

## **Step 7**

Adoption and Integration of BPL—BPL is adopted and incorporated into one's language of practice and results in consistent and promising outcomes. BPL is recognized as an ubiquitous interpersonal skill and respected as a purposeful and technical element of practice that is not overlooked, disregarded, or taken for granted. It serves as a catalyst for schoolwide reform and the use of BPL spreads throughout the organization.

# Mining Community Engagement Gold

This powerful model for acquiring the BPL of local experts gave way for the collection of numerous BPL examples for the major issues identified at each school. This collection constituted an individual school report for each school. Below are some examples of BPL for 3 of the major issues identified at all five schools.

## Discipline Disruptions

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|---|---|
| Major Issue: Discipline Disruptions   |   |
| Best Practice Language Examplesfrom Literature Review and Local Expert InterviewsSample BPL Categories: Words of Connection; Words of Respect for Self and Others; Words of Unity   |   |
| Words of Connection   |   |
| BPL Literature ReviewThe quality of teacher-student relationships is the keystone for all other aspects of classroom management. (Marzano & Marzano, 2003, p 4.)Teachers can... Talk informally with students before, during, and after class about their interests.Single out a few students each day in the lunchroom and talk with them. (Marzano & Marzano, 2003, p | BPL Examples from Local Experts“When you find out some stuff that they care about, and you start to talk about it, then you have some common ground interest with them.” “What’s the problem?” Why are you responding this way? Why don’t you talk to me and tell me why you are saying these things or acting this way towards another student? I want to know what their feelings are. Why do |

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| <p>6.)“Students are more likely to succeed when they feel connected to school. School connection is the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals” (Blum, 2005, P. 20).</p>  | <p>you feel compelled to say this to the other student?”“If you talk with them and let them talk, then you can resolve a lot of these issues without what we typically think of as discipline and so I talk to the kids. Find out what’s going on and what’s driving their feelings of aggression.”</p>  |
| <p>Words of Respect for Self and Others</p>  |  |
| <p>BPL Literature ReviewWhen disruptions occur, successful teachers think about the causes of misbehavior and respond to students as individuals, using disruptions as teachable moments and opportunities to model self-discipline. (Strahan, Cope, Hundley &amp; Faircloth, 2005, p. 26). “We are in this classroom together. I want to help you become competent or go beyond. My job is to teach you and help you learn, not to find out what you don’t know and punish you for not knowing it” (Glasser, 2001, p. 113).</p> | <p>BPL Examples from Local ExpertsWhen students are distracting other students from the school lesson at hand...I would say, “If you have something you would like to share with someone else, wait until I finish my lesson then we will give you the opportunity to discuss what you have to say.”I will go into what I mean by respecting each other. I will ask them “What is it that you expect out of me?” And I will tell them what I expect out of them.“I respect you, you respect me.”</p> |
| <p>Words of Unity</p>  |  |
| <p>BPL Literature ReviewCooperation is characterized by a concern for the needs and opinions of</p>  | <p>BPL Examples from Local Experts“The main thing is to let them know what I expect and I tell them what to expect from</p>  |

others. (Marzano & Marzano, 2003, p 4.) We will not find the solution to problems of violence, alienation, ignorance, and unhappiness in increasing our security apparatus, imposing more tests, punishing schools for their failure to produce 100 percent proficiency, or demanding that teachers be knowledgeable in “the subjects they teach.” Instead, we must allow teachers and students to interact as whole persons, and we must develop policies that treat the school as a whole community. The future of both our children and our democracy depend on our moving in this direction. (Noddings, 2005, p. 13).

me. I do not try to change in the middle of the year. I stick to what I said in the beginning of the year and I follow through. I talk with them about teacher responsibility, student responsibility, and how to be responsible in the classroom.” “We all have to uphold the expectations so that everyone can learn so we must all work together. If you are talking too much, then you are interfering with someone else’s learning process.” “From the very first day of class we set up ground rules. We work together to complete those ground rules throughout the year. It allows students to have some ownership.”

(Holloman & Yates, 2008).

## Student Lack of Interest/Motivating Students

Major Issue: Student Lack of Interest/Motivating Students

Best Practice Language Examples from Literature Review and Local Expert Interviews  
Sample BPL Categories: Words of Care; Words of

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| Inertia; Words of Love  |   |
| Words of Care   |   |
| <p>BPL Literature Review“Because we provide tremendous care and attention to individual students and give them the opportunity to meaningfully connect with adults and explore their interest in the real world, students learn to love coming to school” (Castleman &amp; Littky, 2007, p. 60).“For the good of our children, we need to start with the student, not the subject.” (Castleman &amp; Littky, 2007, p. 61).“Students are more likely to succeed when they feel connected to school. School connection is the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals” (Blum, 2005, p. 20).</p> | <p>BPL Examples“They have to feel that sense of caring because we really don’t know where they’re coming from.”“Then you speak to that child a lot and get to know him personally and understand his needs and encourage him. I think a lot of kids just need to know that somebody cares enough to help him/her to become the best that he/she can.”“Interest is what it’s all about and it has to be sincere. You have to be sincere and kids know when you’re not. You have to really care about kids and if you don’t then you need to get out of the profession because they know it and they can see right through you, same way if you’re not prepared for class, they know it.”</p> |
| Words of Inertia  |   |
| <p>BPL Literature Review“When we start with students’ interests and create an education that considers how students best learn and who they are as individuals, we cannot help but achieve far</p>  | <p>BPL Examples“Come. Let’s go see what the career fair has to offer us, and let’s go through this step-by-step and see what you can find, and what your potential goals will be. And in the meantime, tell me what you</p>   |

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| <p>greater outcomes—the most important of which is our students’ happiness and love of learning” (Castleman &amp; Littky, 2007, p. 61). “Quite often, boys do their best work when teachers establish authentic purpose and meaningful, real-life connections” (King &amp; Gurian, 2006, p. 60).</p>   | <p>intend to do in life. Is this what you really want to do, or is this what someone else wants you to do?”</p>  |
| <p>Words of Love</p>   |  |
| <p>BPL Literature Review “One reason the committed teacher insists on true learning is because he or she knows that learning is a lifelong affair. Therefore, the committed teacher loves learning and practices it, just as he or she tries to instill a similar love in students. Such a teacher knows that students learn best from teachers who are also engaged in the act of learning” (Cain, M. 2001 p. 703).</p> | <p>BPL Examples “Somebody needs to show a little love and a little concern about the child and they will be successful.” “My kids know—if I chew them out, I tell them I love them.” “I use that word (“love”) all day long, from Monday to Friday. That’s the only thing that makes the world turn as positive as it is turning. I don’t have to like you, but I love you.”</p> |

(Holloman & Yates, 2008).

## **Lack of Parental Support**



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| Major Issue: Lack of Parental Support  |  |
| Best Practice Language Examples from Literature Review and Local Expert Interviews<br>Sample BPL Categories: Words of Agreement; Words of Understanding; Words of Wisdom   |  |
| Words of Agreement   |  |
| <p>BPL Literature Review<br/>“Part of this philosophy is an implicit belief that all public-school stakeholders will recognize their roles in making schools a success. Administrators and teachers alike must believe that parents, when given a well-defined role in their children’s education, will not only agree to accept responsibility but will also perform to the best of their ability”<br/>(Weil, 1998 p. 7).</p> | <p>BPL Examples from Local Experts<br/>“Work with your child and see what they’re doing and have those expectations of success then we’ll work together to form a partnership... it’s like a safety net...we’re (teacher and parents) going to form a safety net under the student to bounce you back up if you start to fall.”<br/>“Let me work with you and I’ll make sure that you feel comfortable about how we’re working together and our working together will make your child feel comfortable in school.”</p> |
| Words of Understanding   |  |
| <p>BPL Literature Review<br/>“Many of these parents have had bad experiences in school themselves, and thus, are reluctant to be involved with the school, even as a parent. They may feel</p>   | <p>BPL Examples from Local Experts<br/>“I would talk to the parent to try to reassure them that school is a comfort zone. You’re supposed to feel safe and comfortable here. I don’t mind if they just talk with me and try to express their feelings about what happened that’s making them feel uncomfortable.</p>   |

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| <p>intimidated by the schools and unsure of their contribution” (Kaufman, Perry, &amp; Prentice, 2001, p. 6).</p>   | <p>Maybe we could work on some ways to get that comfort level back up. I would try to work with the parent myself one-on-one.”</p>   |
| <p>Words of Wisdom</p>  |  |
| <p>BPL Literature Review“Parents know far more about their children than any school ever will and they have far more ‘learning time’ with their children than the school does” (Wherry, 2007, p. 8).“Climbing out from between the rock of diminishing parental support and the hard wall of diminishing positive external support will requires the collective effort of schools, parents, communities, businesses, and students” (Weil,1998, p. 7).</p> | <p>BPL Examples“ You might not know how to teach my subject area—but you know how to monitor your child and you know how to talk to your child—we are all on the same team here—and if we can figure our a way that you and I can communicate directly—we can probably short circuit any problems.”“I use various words that talk about “inviting”—I invite you to come to this—I invite you—I’m not asking them to come because there is a problem. The other word I use a lot is “compliment”—I want to compliment your child about...but I have this other little area of concern. I always start with something positive—always!</p> |

(Holloman & Yates, 2008).

## Lessons Learned

In his book, *Mobilizing the Community to Help Students Succeed*, Price (2008) advocates the importance of community involvement in the educational realm and views communities as “a largely underappreciated

and untapped resource” in the arena of school reform (p. 21). We have learned—and continue to learn—a great deal from our experiences and involvement in this type of research. Community engagement scholarship is extremely complex and interpersonal. It is service-oriented and requires a strong set of interpersonal skills and a willingness to listen to all stakeholders. As a reminder to ourselves and for the consideration of others, we offer the following eight keys to community engagement scholarship success.

### **Servant Researchers**

"We are from the university and we are here to help you..." These words can easily strike fear in the hearts and minds of local educators. It is important to make sure that those words are followed by a humility and genuine interest in listening to the district's needs and offering support that meets specific needs—not the needs we perceive. Helping to meet the needs that seem small can help to establish trust among researchers and community members.

### **Consistency**

The schedule and responsibilities within the academy often precludes a tenure-track professor from committing to consistent sessions in the field. Meeting with community members every few weeks does not convey a commitment, nor does it allow for time to develop meaningful and trustworthy relationships.

### **Valuing the Voices**

Our research project was developed to allow all members of the organization to participate. We discovered that this approach was extremely helpful when we presented the research findings. The faculty and staff from each school were extremely receptive to the research reports and

implications of the findings because they were a part of the process. Each voice was heard.

### **One-on-One**

The one-on-one sessions with each school principal and each local expert provided an opportunity for lots of discussion and relationship building. Although each interview was structured—there was always time allotted for personal dialogue and sharing. The principals were extremely supportive of the project—in fact, to highlight the positive partnership; one principal signed an email, “Collaboratively”.

### **Highlight the Success that is Already Happening**

There is a tendency in this type of research for researchers to focus on the problem-solving and forget the current successes. The researchers must intentionally search for and emphasize the best practices within the organization. This approach is critical in maintaining a healthy organizational climate.

### **Ground Your Findings in Current Research**

Obviously this suggestion is like “preaching to the choir”. When we aligned the Best Practice Language of our local experts with the contemporary research it validated the current work of the practitioners. Upon reading the reports and seeing the agreement in research and their practice, many of them said, “I’ve been doing that for years—it’s nice to know that the research supports it!”

### **Know the Untouchables**

At our very first meeting with the superintendent's administrative team, we heard several comments regarding the need to protect instructional time—and teacher's planning time. Throughout the research project, we worked carefully with each school principal to ensure that these concerns were addressed.

## **University Support**

Earlier we mentioned that institutions value this type of research differently. Our university demonstrated its commitment to this project by providing us release time. There is no possible way that we could have spent the time in the field and the time researching and writing without some additional time. If you are considering this type of research, we encourage you to initiate discussions within your department or college to determine the level of support (i.e. course release, buy-out time) that would be provided if you were to pursue such a research endeavor.

## **Discussions and Conclusions**

With the BPL methodology, members of an organization are challenged to seek better ways to convey thoughts, ideas, priorities, functions, tasks, and even feelings. Members can begin to develop a heightened awareness of their own language and the “language of practice” around them. Structures within the organizational context can also begin to change, and every member of the organization is given a voice in the process.

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Our BPL research would have never occurred without the support of our university. This community engagement model of research is valued at our institution. It has led to stronger relationships, purposeful partnerships, and a foundation for future collaborations between university researchers and county practitioners. In a report from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2000), the authors suggest that “while some members of the higher education community maintain that higher education should ideally be ‘value free,’ we believe that any form of education is inherently value-laden.” (p. 9).

Most assuredly, the citizenry will continue to place value on what colleges and universities are doing to make a positive impact on society. While some will argue that colleges and universities have always engaged the community at some level, our concern is what seems to be a current “collective complacency”. Our hope is that other institutions will revisit their current policies and practices in an effort to support and reward such research endeavors; therefore, placing a renewed value on the scholarship of community engagement.

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# School Climate Differences between High-Performing and Low-Performing Schools that Serve High-Poverty Populations



**Note:** This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of education administration. This Volume 10, Number 1 and others are archived at the **International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation** (Supplemental Link). IAuthor: **Ronald Lindahl, Professor, Alabama State University.**

## Introduction

In an effort to determine to what extent Alabama educators perceive that “their school has positive teaching conditions where teachers are supported and empowered” (Take20 Alabama faqs, 2008, n. p.), all public-school-based licensed educators in the state were requested to respond to the Take20 Alabama Teaching and Learning Conditions Survey. This survey instrument was developed, administered, and analyzed by the New Teacher Center at the University of California – Santa Cruz and LEARN North Carolina. Versions of this survey had previously been completed by over a quarter million educators in eight states (Take20 Alabama faqs, 2008). Nearly 30,000 (47.14%) Alabama educators responded during January and February, 2008 (Hirsch, Freitas, & Villar, 2008).

Consistent with the purpose of the Take20 survey, the majority of the items were related to school climate; the remainder focused on staff development needs and practices and on the recently instituted mentoring program for new teachers. This article focuses exclusively on the school climate items and compares educators’ responses from high-performing elementary,



middle, and junior high schools serving high-poverty populations with similar grade level schools serving similar socio-economic populations but which failed to meet their Annual Yearly Progress goals for 2007-2008.

## **Schools in the Study Population**

The high-performing schools studied were those schools which had been awarded the Alabama Torchbearer School designation since the 2004-2005 school year. To qualify as a Torchbearer School, the school must meet the following criteria:

- At least 70% of the student population receives free or reduced price meals.
- At least 70% of the students score at Level III or Level IV (Proficient) on all sections of the Alabama Reading and Mathematics Test.
- The average percentile stands above 50 in reading and in mathematics on the Stanford 10 assessment. (Schargel, Thacker, & Bell, 2007, p. 144)

Additionally, only Torchbearer Schools in which a minimum of 40% of the eligible educators completed the Take20 survey were included. Nineteen elementary, middle, and junior high schools met these criteria.

A comparison population of lower-performing elementary, middle, and junior high schools serving low-income students was selected using data from the Alabama Department of Education's (ALSDE) web site (<http://www.alasde.edu>). First, the ALSDE's list of schools that did not make Adequate Yearly Progress for school year 2007-2008 was used to determine which schools met this criterion. Then the ALSDE data base on those schools was consulted to identify which of those schools served populations in which 70% or more of the students qualified for free or reduce priced lunch. Statewide, a total of 27 schools met these criteria.

## **School Climate**

Although there are many definitions and conceptual models of school climate, the one chosen as the basis for this analysis was developed by

Tagiuri (1968). Tagiuri presented a model of organizational climate comprised of four factors: culture (psychosocial characteristics), ecology (physical and material elements), milieu (human social system elements), and social system (structural elements). Culture refers to such things as assumptions, values, norms, belief systems, history, heroes, myths, rituals, artifacts, and visible and audible behavior patterns. Ecology refers to such things as buildings and facilities, as well as technology used for communication, scheduling, and pedagogy. Social system elements include how instruction, administration, support services, decision making, planning, and formal structures are organized. Milieu focuses on the people in the organization, e.g., their skills, motivation, feelings, values, demographics, and leadership (Owens & Valesky, 2007).

Anderson (1982, p. 383) noted that, “In general, as researchers move into social system and culture dimensions and away from ecology and milieu, constructs become more abstract. Findings in turn are harder to compare because the variables and constructs are not necessarily operationalized in the same way.” Hoy and Tarter (1997) recommended that if the research purpose is to identify the underlying forces that motivate behavior in a school or the values and symbolism of the school, then a cultural approach is advised; if the study is to describe the actual behavior with the purpose of managing and changing it, then a climate approach is more appropriate. With both of these issues in mind, and recognizing that the purpose of this study is to describe the behaviors and their relationship to student performance, only the ecology, social system, and milieu factors from Tagiuri’s (1968) model were examined in this study. The Take20 survey contained ample items on all three factors.

Although some researchers question the use of perceptual data in research studies, in the case of school climate, it has usually been accepted as a direct indicator of normative climate (Anderson, 1982; Sarason, 1971). Consequently, the Take20 data were judged as adequate and appropriate for this study.

## **Research on School Climate and Student Performance**

Considerable research has been conducted linking school climate to student performance. The overall conclusion of that research has been that climate exists as an essential element of successful schools (Bliss, Firestone, & Richards, 1991; Carter, 2000; Cruickshank, 1990; DuFour, 2000; DuFour & Eaker, 1996; Edmonds, 1979 a & b; Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001; Hoy & Feldman, 1987; Hoy & Hannum, 1997; Klinger, 2000; Lezotte, 1991, 1992, 2001).

Feigenberg's (2007) study found a moderate positive relationship between a healthy school climate and student reading achievement. Smith (2008) found a moderate positive relationship between school climate and English achievement, but failed to find any significant relationship between climate and mathematics achievement. Smith, Hoy, and Sweetland (2003) found a positive relationship between overall school climate and student achievement. However, they found that the climate element, academic emphasis, was even more highly related than the overall climate measure. This finding was not surprising, for, as Taylor (2008) pointed out, although climate is often studied as a single construct, further study is needed on how the various elements of climate relate to student performance.

For example, Taylor (2008) found reading achievement to be particularly related to student discipline and school safety. Pendergast (2007) found a weak, positive relationship between expectations for students and their achievement. Rutter, Mauhan, Mortimore, Ouston, and Smith (1979) and Brookover and Lezotte (1979) found a positive relationship between teacher morale and attendance and student performance.

McDill and Rigsby (1973), Rutter et al. (1979), and Weber (1971) found no relationship between the age of the school buildings and student achievement, attendance, or behavior. However, Rutter et al. and the 1980 Phi Delta Kappa study did find that the decoration and care of schools and classrooms were positively related to student achievement.

The relationships among administrators, faculty, and staff have also been found to be related to student achievement (Ellett & Walberg, 1979; New York State Department of Education, 1976). Feldvebel (1964), Hale (1965), and Miller (1968) found a negative relationship between principals' assignment of paperwork to teachers and student achievement. Feldvebel,

Maxwell (1967), and Miller found a positive relationship between principal consideration and student achievement. Ellet and Walberg, Rutter et al. (1979), and Xie (2008) found a positive relationship between teacher shared decision making and student achievement.

Goddard (2001) defined collective efficacy as the perceptions of teachers in a school that the faculty as a group can employ actions to increase student achievement. Goddard (2001), Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy (2000), and Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004) found this element of climate related to increases in student achievement. Goddard also found that social networks with high trust and high academic engagement fostered high student achievement.

Taylor (2008) advocated examining the differential relationships climate may have with achievement among varied student populations. The present study focused on high-poverty student populations. Research on similar populations has found that students who live in poverty experience school differently from more affluent students (Caldas & Bankston, 1997; Comer, 2001; Griffith, 2002; Williams, 2003). However, students in high-minority and high-poverty schools can perform well (Hauser-Cram, Warfield, Stadler, & Sirin, 2005; Haynes, Gebreyesus, & Comer, 1993; Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Simon & Izumi, 2003). Students from elementary schools with positive climates progress to middle schools with greater success (Hauser-Cram et al.)

School climate has been found to be related to student achievement in high-poverty schools (Haynes et al., 1993). Carter (2000) reviewed 21 high-performing, high-poverty schools (nationwide) and found that, among other things, principals in these schools were free to decide whom to hire, principals held high expectations, and the pursuit of excellence was the norm. These school administrators and faculty used data for student diagnosis and goal setting. Hughes (1995) found that effective elementary schools serving high-poverty populations had identified instructional leaders who communicate openly and who are supportive of teachers and of the academic program. Towns, Cole-Henderson, and Serpell (2001) examined four urban schools serving low-income populations with high academic success. All four schools had strong principals, high expectations

for achievement, monitored student progress, maintained discipline, and strong parental involvement. Krawczyk (2007) found a positive relationship between student academic performance and teacher perceptions of the overall school climate. However, this relationship did not hold for all subcategories of climate, e.g., neither the teacher learning environment nor the student learning environment nor the student social and physical environments showed a significant relationship to achievement. Smith (2008) found a moderate positive relationship between both collegial leadership and academic press and both English and math achievement in high-poverty elementary schools. Kannapel, Clements, Taylor, and Hibpshman (2005) concluded that in high-performing, high-poverty schools, the school climate factors that related to academic success are: high expectations for students, collaborative decision making between the teacher and the principal, caring staff and faculty, parent/teacher communication, strong faculty morale and work ethic, a strong academic and instructional focus, and coordinated staffing strategies.

Fortunately, the Take 20 survey contained items specific to all issues highlighted in this review of the knowledge base on school climate. The study's exclusive focus on schools serving low-income students met Taylor's (2008) recommendation that school climate be examined in relation to specific student populations.

## **Analysis of the Data**

Because the schools in both groups represent the population, not a sample, of the eligible schools for that group, only descriptive statistics were necessary for the data analysis. Percentages of responses in each response category for each item provide clear and easy insight into the data.

Consistent with Taylor's (2008) recommendation to look at specific climate factors rather than only at overall school climate scores, Tables 1 through 3 present the distributions of responses for the school-climate-related questions on the Take20 survey. For all tables, the response keys are identical: STA=Strongly Agree, SA=Somewhat Agree, NA/ND= Neither Agree nor Disagree, SD=Somewhat Disagree, and STD=Strongly Disagree. For many of the items of the survey, the greatest difference between the

responses of teachers in Torchbearer Schools and those of their peers in Comparison Schools was the percentage of individuals who responded Strongly Agree; Torchbearer Schools teachers led this category on almost all items.

In order to look at each of Tagiuri's (1968) three factors as entities, means and standard deviations were calculated by summing the responses to all items for each standard. Five points were assigned to each Strongly Agree response, four points to each Somewhat Agree response, three points to each Neither Agree nor Disagree response, two points to each Somewhat Disagree response, and one point to each Strongly Disagree response. The school was the primary unit of analysis; however, the results for the Torchbearer Schools were averaged, as were those of the schools in the Comparison Schools group and those in the full, statewide population. These means and standard deviations were then used in the calculation of effect sizes (Cohen's D).

When interpreting data from population studies, it is important to note that whatever differences are demonstrated are real differences, not differences that could be attributable to sampling error. Consequently, the reader/interpreter of the data must give particularly careful attention to the practical significance of those differences. This is a judgment that is best made by educators who understand school environments and school climate issues well.

## **Ecology**

Among the items related to ecology (Table 1), the Torchbearer Schools teachers presented more positive responses to most items. Although the Torchbearer Schools teachers' responses were somewhat more positive than those of the Comparison Schools teachers, both sets of teachers were generally quite positive about their access to instructional materials and resources, their access to technology to support instruction, the physical environments of their classroom, their access to reliable communication technology; and their access to office equipment and supplies. Torchbearer Schools teachers also reported being shielded by school leadership from disruptions and working with colleagues who viewed time as a flexible resource; their Comparison Schools peers' responses showed considerable

less satisfaction in these areas. However, the two largest differences between the groups were in working in a safe school environment and working in a school that is clean and well maintained. For these items, respectively, 69% and 64% of the Torchbearer Schools teachers responded Strongly Agree, versus only 33% and 38% of the faculty from the Comparison Schools. The exception to Torchbearer Schools faculty responses being more positive was in relation to those items related to the amount of time available during the school day for instruction, working with other teachers, and non-instructional time. For these items, little difference was found between the two populations.

When the responses to the 14 ecology items were summed to form a pseudo-continuous variable, the mean for the Torchbearer Schools was 3.84 (SD=.65) compared to the Comparison Schools' mean of 3.49 (SD=.44). This difference yielded a Cohen's D of 0.63, generally considered to be a moderate effect size.

## **Milieu**

In regard to the milieu factors (Table 2), again the Torchbearer Schools' teachers were consistently and considerably more positive about their school climate than were their Comparison Schools peers. The differences were more pronounced than those for the ecology factor.

Striking differences were found in the two groups' responses to there being an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect in the school, with 78% of the Torchbearer Schools faculty responding Strongly Agree or Somewhat Agree, versus 62% of the faculty in the Comparison Schools. On the item, school leadership encourages the faculty to meet high performance standards, 76% of the faculty in the Torchbearer Schools responded Strongly Agree, compared to only 56% of the Comparison Schools faculty. Similarly, 85% of the Torchbearer Schools faculty responded Strongly Agree or Somewhat Agree to school leaders selecting the highest quality teachers available, versus only 66% of their Comparison Schools peers. Torchbearer Schools faculty (77% responded Strongly Agree) viewed their colleagues as being more committed to helping every student learn than did their Comparison Schools peers (49% responded Strongly Agree). Similar differences were found in the percentage of faculty in both groups of

schools responding Strongly Agree to school leadership encouraging high performance standards for the faculty (76% versus 56%), the overall effectiveness of the school leadership (63% versus 39%), and the overall rating of the school as a good place to work and learn (74% versus 42%). The smallest differences were found in regard to the extent to which reasoned educational risk-taking is encouraged and supported. Only a slight majority in either group (56% and 54%) responded Strongly Agree or Somewhat Agree to this item.

Table 1

**Ecology Elements**

| Question  | Torchbearer Schools Responses (%)Comparison<br>Schools Responses (%) |      |       |      |     |
|---|--|------|-------|------|-----|
|   | STA  | SA   | NA/ND | SD   | STD |
| Teachers have sufficient access to appropriate instructional materials and resources. | 4934   | 3940 | 35    | 813  | 29  |
| Teachers have sufficient access to technology that supports instruction, including    | 5136   | 3037 | 24    | 1115 | 58  |



|   |      |      |      |      |      |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|
| computers,<br>printers,<br>software and<br>internet access.   |      |      |      |      |      |
| The physical<br>environment of<br>classrooms in<br>this school<br>supports<br>teaching and<br>learning.                   | 5530 | 3141 | 69   | 615  | 25   |
| Efforts are<br>made to<br>minimize the<br>amount of<br>routine<br>administrative<br>paperwork<br>required of<br>teachers. | 1311 | 3028 | 1313 | 2223 | 2225 |
| Teachers and<br>staff work in a<br>school<br>environment<br>that is safe.   | 6933 | 2641 | 48   | 210  | 06   |
| This school<br>and its grounds<br>are clean and<br>well-<br>maintained.   | 6438 | 2838 | 1519 | 1115 | 46   |
| Teachers have<br>sufficient   | 3727 | 3334 | 1519 | 1115 | 46   |

|  |      |      |     |     |     |
|--|------|------|-----|-----|-----|
| access to a broad range of non-classroom-based professional personnel.   |      |      |     |     |     |
| Teacher communication with parents, students and colleagues is supported by reliable communication technology, including phones, faxes, and email. | 5133 | 3243 | 109 | 611 | 23  |
| Teachers have sufficient access to office equipment and supplies such as copy machines, paper, markers, etc.                                       | 5236 | 3334 | 45  | 916 | 310 |
| School leadership shields teachers from disruptions, allowing teachers to  | 5431 | 2724 | 79  | 718 | 513 |

|  |      |      |      |      |      |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|
| focus on educating students.   |      |      |      |      |      |
| Teachers have adequate instructional time during the regular school work day to meet the educational needs of all students.              | 2120 | 4040 | 45   | 2221 | 1314 |
| Teachers have adequate time during the regular school work day to work with their colleagues on issues related to teaching and learning. | 109  | 2726 | 77   | 3032 | 2526 |
| Educators in my school view time as a flexible resource for learning and modify schedules, when appropriate, to optimize                 | 3422 | 3839 | 1015 | 1314 | 610  |

|  |      |      |      |      |      |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|
| learning for students and adults in the schools.                             |      |      |      |      |      |
| The non-instructional time provided for teachers in my school is sufficient. | 1414 | 2629 | 1011 | 3025 | 2121 |

Table 2

### Milieu Elements

| Question  | Torchbearer Schools Responses (%)Comparison Schools Responses (%) |      |       |      |     |
|---|---|------|-------|------|-----|
|   | STA   | SA   | NA/ND | SD   | STD |
| There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect within the school. | 4829  | 3033 | 512   | 1216 | 611 |
| School leadership encourages the faculty to meet                      | 7656  | 1933 | 35    | 14   | 12  |

|   |      |      |     |     |     |
|---|------|------|-----|-----|-----|
| high performance standards.   |      |      |     |     |     |
| School leadership consistently enforces rules for student conduct.                          | 5233 | 2628 | 810 | 915 | 714 |
| Teachers receive feedback that can help them improve teaching.                              | 5738 | 3037 | 713 | 47  | 25  |
| School leadership selects the highest quality teachers available to fill faculty positions. | 6135 | 2431 | 919 | 49  | 26  |
| The faculty are committed to helping every student learn.                                   | 7749 | 1736 | 38  | 25  | 12  |
| School leadership encourages the faculty to meet high                                       | 7656 | 1933 | 35  | 14  | 12  |

|   |      |      |      |      |    |
|---|------|------|------|------|----|
| performance standards.                                      |      |      |      |      |    |
| Overall, the school leadership in my school is effective.   | 6339 | 2233 | 59   | 614  | 56 |
| Overall, my school is a good place to work and learn.       | 7442 | 1732 | 410  | 411  | 25 |
| Reasoned education risk-taking is encouraged and supported. | 3123 | 2531 | 2828 | 1113 | 56 |

When the responses to the 10 milieu items were summed to form a pseudo-continuous variable, the mean for the Torchbearer Schools was 3.69 (SD=.45), compared to the Comparison Schools' mean of 2.97 (SD=.30). This difference yielded a Cohen's D of 1.88, a large effect size.

### **Social System**

In regard to the social system elements (Table 3), again the Torchbearer Schools teachers viewed their school climates considerably more favorably than the comparison group on almost all items. The lone exception was that both groups provided very similar responses to the item, Teachers are encouraged to participate in professional leadership activities.

When the responses to the 13 social system items were summed to form a pseudo-continuous variable, the mean for the Torchbearer Schools was 3.26 (SD=.40) compared to the Comparison Schools' mean of 2.81 (SD=.31).

This difference yielded a Cohen’s D of 1.26, generally considered to be a large effect size.

Conclusions

Overall, the results are very consistent – teachers in the Torchbearer Schools perceived their school climates to be more positive than did the teachers in the Comparison Schools. This can readily been seen in the responses to the overarching climate item, Overall, my school is a good place to work and learn. Seventy-four percent of the Torchbearer Schools teachers responded Strongly Agree to this item, as compared to only 42% of the teachers in the Comparison Schools. The Take20 survey contained items on almost all of the elements previous researchers had found to be related to student performance. The findings of this study of elementary, middle, and junior high school teachers in Alabama public schools serving high-poverty populations strongly support the previous research linking positive school climates to increased student achievement.

Social System Elements

| Question   | Torchbearer Schools Responses (%)Comparison Schools Responses (%) |      |       |    |     |
|--|---|------|-------|----|-----|
|  | STA   | SA   | NA/ND | SD | STD |
| School leadership facilitates the use of data to improve student learning. | 7158  | 2131 | 36    | 13 | 12  |

|  |      |      |      |      |     |
|--|------|------|------|------|-----|
| Professional learning opportunities are driven by analysis of student learning data.                             | 5841 | 2938 | 1013 | 45   | 02  |
| Enhancing teacher knowledge and skills is a priority strategy for increasing student achievement at this school. | 5842 | 3539 | 511  | 35   | 03  |
| Professional learning opportunities are aligned with this school's continuous improvement plan.                  | 5642 | 3438 | 913  | 16   | 02  |
| Teachers are centrally involved in important educational decision making.  | 3224 | 4241 | 712  | 1514 | 510 |
|  |      |      |      |      |     |



|   |      |      |      |      |     |
|---|------|------|------|------|-----|
| Teachers are engaged in decisions about continuous school improvement.                              | 4133 | 3739 | 911  | 1211 | 26  |
| Teachers are trusted to make sound professional decisions about instruction.                        | 4535 | 3237 | 59   | 1312 | 57  |
| The broader community recognizes and respects teachers as professionals.                            | 2918 | 3734 | 916  | 2022 | 511 |
| Sufficient resources are available to allow teachers to pursue professional development activities. | 5130 | 3139 | 916  | 710  | 25  |
| Teachers are encouraged to reflect on their own practice.   | 4635 | 3350 | 1316 | 68   | 24  |
| Opportunities are available   | 5537 | 2937 | 1016 | 57   | 23  |

|   |      |      |      |     |    |
|---|------|------|------|-----|----|
| for members of this community to contribute to this school's success.         |      |      |      |     |    |
| Teachers are encouraged to participate in professional leadership activities. | 4036 | 2933 | 2116 | 710 | 17 |
| In this school, we take steps to solve problems.                              | 5636 | 2935 | 712  | 710 | 17 |

Consistent with Taylor's (2008) advice, examining the individual elements of school climate yielded greater insight than using aggregated climate indices. Torchbearer School teachers reported more positively on almost all climate elements contained in the Take20 survey. Of Tagiuri's (1968) climate factors, the greatest difference between the more successful and less successful schools examined in this study were in the milieu factor. This demonstrates that the human elements of school climate are vital to the success of the school. As Owens and Valesky (2007) noted, the leadership of the school has a strong relationship with the school's success, as do the teachers' motivation, satisfaction, feelings, morale, and values. Although some of the differences between the climates of these two groups of schools may be attributable to a halo or Pygmalion effect following a school's academic success, some of them may be attributable to causal links between school climate and that success. Consequently, building and maintaining a healthy school climate should be a priority for all school leaders.

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## Renewing a School Leadership Program: A Work in Progress



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### Introduction

In **Leading to Learn**, a recent report funded by the Wallace Foundation, Olson calls attention to the need for traditional leadership training programs to “focus less on creating efficient managers” and more on “preparing individuals who can lead a school to higher student achievement” (2007, p.6). This observation comes at a time when school leadership training programs have been under increased scrutiny (Harchar, 2006). In perhaps the most notable of criticisms, Levin (2005) claimed that the quality of most leadership preparation programs ranges from “inadequate to appalling” (p. 24). Setting aside the argument of whether these criticisms are fair, it is certain that university leadership preparation programs must rethink their purpose and mission. Standards and accountability, a dominant force in the PK-12 environment where most students in educational administration programs work, is quickly becoming the expectation in higher education preparations as well. Designing, implementing, and evaluating a standards-based school leadership program raises important questions and presents special challenges to traditional leadership training programs.

The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), formed in 1994, is comprised of many of the players who have a stake in educational leadership including many states, professional organizations, and universities. This consortium has developed a common set of standards that are having significant influence in school leadership training programs, licensure, and candidate assessment (Hessel & Holloway, 2002). The six ISLLC standards focus on the following: (a) developing a shared vision within schools; (b) creating cultures that support learning; (c) ensuring safe, efficient, and effective learning; (d) collaborating with the broad community; (e) acting in a fair and ethical fashion; (f) understanding the socioeconomic, legal, political and cultural contexts of schools. These standards are useful in assessing the capacity of current and prospective administrators to integrate formal knowledge with performance and reflective practice (Hoyle, 2004).

### The Educational Leadership Program and the Center for Education

Widener University's Center for Education (CfE) Educational Leadership Program offers a Master of Education degree in Educational Leadership, a Doctorate in Education degree as well as

principal, supervisory, and superintendent level certificate programs. The faculty's values as educators guide the efforts to develop curricula in the Educational Leadership Program that embody a collective understanding of "who we are," and "how we wish to behave as educators."

The mission of Widener University's Center for Education is to create and sustain communities of informed and critically reflective practitioners who function in a variety of institutions at all levels of the educational enterprise. This mission calls for interactive learning experiences among faculty and students that promotes the development and application of higher order thinking skills in the University and the field. Commensurate with Widener University's mission, is a vision to maintain a leadership role and to foster the CfE's strong academic and professional reputation for preparing leaders in education at the initial and advanced levels, while ensuring that the graduates are competent and successful in PK—12 school and community settings. We capitalize on the success of our graduates through a regional, professional network and advisory board that advances the University's and CfE's contribution to educational excellence.

## **The Center for Education's Conceptual Framework**

One of the first steps in our renewal process was to begin the work of writing a conceptual framework that would define and guide our efforts. In the end, the faculty determined that the tenets of the CfE's Conceptual Framework would be academic excellence, collaboration, diversity, and lifelong learning. These tenets, which unify all that we aim to do, are embedded in the overarching value of professionalism, with commitments to best practices and technology. It is both the context and the rationale for knowledge, skills, and dispositions that define our Educational Leadership Program. Our faculty is committed to the belief that professionalism is a tangible demonstration of beliefs that promote a virtuous course of action, in the intended meaning of educational philosophers: **that which is desired because of its inherent goodness.**

Widener University's CfE's Educational Leadership Program faculty agrees that professionalism possesses inherent value because it encourages educators to reflect on the reasons for their decisions and the consequences of their actions (Beyer & Apple, 1998). Through professionalism educators renew and transform their knowledge and expertise (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996; Levine, 1996.) Transformation and renewal of the CfE's Educational Leadership Program are demonstrated by our willingness to act in ways that:

1. Accept the essential value of diversity with regard to ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, gender, exceptionalities, language, religion, sexual orientation, and geographical area;
2. Demonstrate appropriate codes of conduct for educational leadership students because they are dedicated to the well-being of their student and faculty populations;
3. Develop a deep commitment to lifelong learning;
4. Internalize the values of the educational leadership profession and act within the framework of our chosen professional identity;
5. Learn from the field through collaboration and engagement; and
6. Understand important connections between discipline-specific content and societal problems.

Professionalism in our leadership program is reinforced by our commitment to integrate the values inherent in our conceptual framework described in the following sections (Widener University, Center for Education, Conceptual Framework; 2007).

## Academic Excellence

Sheilds (2004) in *Creating a Community of Difference*, purports that academic excellence and citizenship are interrelated. Because civic engagement and academic citizenship are held in such high regard at Widener University, we believe a blending of academic excellence and civic integrity can be achieved. In the CfE's Conceptual Framework (2007), academic excellence is described as being comprised of "deep knowledge in academic disciplines, basic skills, educational foundations, and teaching and learning that is research-based" (p.4). Our inclusion of academic excellence in the framework is further supported by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) Standard One—Candidate Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions. Specifically, NCATE Standard One states: "Candidates preparing to work in schools as teachers or other professional school personnel know and demonstrate the content, pedagogical, and professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to help all students learn." (<http://www.ncate.org/public/unitStandardsRubrics.asp?ch=1>).

In addition to general knowledge and basic skills, students in our educational leadership program, as well as students in all undergraduate and graduate programs, must also have knowledge of the fundamental historical, social, and philosophical foundations in their particular field (Cremin, 1961; Cuban, 1993; Grossman, Wilson, & Shulman, 1990; Kliebard, 1998; Murray & Porter, 1996; Shulman, 1987). The CfE conceptual framework (2007) describes the importance of student assessment:

Their theoretical understanding is assessed in terms of their awareness of how theories are translated into practice (Eisner & Vallance, 1974; Gardner, 1993; Tyler, 1949). Project-based learning, cooperative learning, mentoring, electronic communication, and field experiences provide social contexts for the application and understanding of knowledge-specific content (Office of Policy Planning and Innovation, 2003). [Widener University, Center for Education, Conceptual Framework, 2007.]

The ISLLC standards are embedded in our educational leadership program. We believe, in particular, that **Vision, School Culture, Collaboration, Ethics** and the **Larger Context of Education** dovetail our value for civic engagement and academic citizenship.

## Collaboration

Professional learning communities are often endorsed as unique and collaborative opportunities (Dooner, Mandzuk, and Clifton, 2008). The CfE faculty believes that the development of professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions is grounded in collaboration. As future instructional leaders, our students will face the challenge of facilitating and guiding effective collaborative relationships among teachers and paraprofessionals. Hence, the inclusion of collaboration in the CfE's conceptual framework (2007) states:

The CfE's graduate students learn to take the perspective of an educational leader and acquire the ability to create, while simultaneously sustaining a personal and professional identity that has parity with colleagues and peers (Beckman, 1990; Bruner, 1985; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1999; Darling-Hammond & Cobb, 1996; Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1991). Collaboration in our students is assessed in terms of how they internalize the values of the

profession and act within the framework of their chosen professional identity and its values (Rau & Heyl, 1990). [Widener University, Center for Education, Conceptual Framework, 2007.]

In a recent study, So and Brusch (2008) found that students who perceive high levels of collaborative learning report having a positive experience in their graduate training. Students in our educational leadership program have a variety of opportunities via field placements, research projects, signature assignments, and in-class simulations to exhibit their collaborative skills.

## **Diversity**

Henze (2000) asserted that school leaders have the power to influence improved interethnic relations among students; greater staff collaboration, greater awareness of factors that contribute to improved inter-ethnic understanding and more participation by parents from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. It remains a continuing challenge for professors of educational leadership to craft internship experiences that prepare candidates for certification as principals, supervisors and district superintendents to be leaders of schools where diversity increasingly defines both the mix of students and the character of local communities. For candidates who are school and district administrators in communities where there is little or no cultural diversity, the challenge for educational leadership programs is even greater (Webster-Smith, 2008). The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) has identified 4 key areas where diversity should be addressed in the preparation of candidates for initial licensure as teachers and candidates for advanced certificates. These areas are Curriculum and Experiences, Diverse Candidates, Diverse P-12 Experiences for Candidates, and Diverse Faculty (<http://www.ncate.org/public/unitStandardsRubrics.asp?ch=4>). Aware that diversity of schools and communities will be a continuing challenge for educational leadership programs, and in response to NCATE Standard 4 Diversity, the Center for Education adopted the following rationale for including Diversity in its conceptual framework:

Diversity requires understanding, acceptance and the ability to address the uniqueness of individuals (Banks, 2001; Banks & Banks, 1997; Bennett, 1999; Bok, 2002; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003; Tomlinson, 1999). The rapid shift in the demographics of the country (Gay, 1997; Gay, 2000) and in the nature of our institutions (Cushner, McClelland, & Stafford, 2000; Hildebrand, Phenice, Gray, & Hinez, 1996; Smith, 1998) requires that students appreciate individual differences and multiple perspectives. Faculty in the Center for Education use examples from a variety of cultures and groups to illustrate key concepts, principles, generalizations and themes in their subject area or discipline. From the beginning of the undergraduate program, students are exposed to the concept of diversity through courses in the humanities and social sciences, which provide them knowledge about individual and cultural differences. Students participate in service learning projects in both their arts and sciences and professional education courses that bring them into school and community settings in which they further their understanding, acceptance and ability to address the uniqueness of individuals. (p. 10)

Internships invite candidates enrolled in educational leadership certificates to reflect upon culture, language, race and ethnicity, gender differences, exceptionalities, multicultural and global perspectives on learners and learning, and the histories and experiences of students and families systems. These clinical experiences have been designed to help candidates receive feedback and assess their proficiency as leaders in diverse settings.

## **Lifelong Learning**

Hargreaves (2004) restated the nature of leadership for school administrators in the current era of accountability, assessment, and appraisal. Their challenge is to take a radical, long-term view that enhances the intellectual and social capital of schools. This can only be done through collaboration with every sector of the school community, argues Hargreaves, and, in the end, schools will change to communities that promote learning, excellence and leadership. These sentiments were echoed in a policy paper issued by the National Governors' Association (2007). The paper argues that school administrators require skills that can resolve problems presented by hard-to-serve schools and areas of teacher shortage. They are challenged by the need to enhance learning for students who will be employed in what is now a global society, where students must be proficient in language, multicultural awareness, and technology skills. To do this school administrators require support—i.e., training and the flexibility to experiment in contexts that are diverse. These new ways of visualizing educational leadership have implications for certification programs that prepare educational administrators. Professional education when thus redefined asserts the importance of lifelong learning in new ways. One is able to take a comprehensive perspective that extends beyond individual experiences; to contribute to new knowledge as one benefits from training; and to form alliances with leaders of many different organizations and professions and learn from their experiences redefine professional development and assert the importance of lifelong learning (Litky & Shen, 2003). The ability to see the big picture and to integrate knowledge and skill gained from varied contexts implies that professional practice is something that evolves – that is honed over an entire career as a principal, supervisor or district superintendent. The Center for Education therefore shaped its definition of life-long learning, understanding that leadership must be viewed as something that is encouraged through sustained engagement with complex and challenging experiences in the field.

Graduate and undergraduate students understand that their learning is a continuous and lifelong process, and faculty must continually challenge them to reflect on their learning and evaluate their goals and actions. The value of lifelong learning enables students to develop a deep commitment to learning, which they model in their relationships with students and peers. Through lifelong learning educators retain their intellectual and professional vitality. They become part of broader learning communities that contribute to education in the region and in other parts of the world (Moreno, 2005; World Bank, 2003). [Widener University, Center for Education, Conceptual Framework; 2007].

## **Alignment of the Conceptual Framework to the ISSLC/ELCC Standards**

The desired outcomes of the CfE's Educational Leadership Program, which include knowledge, skills, and dispositions, are consistent with the values the faculty espouses. In the Educational Leadership Program, the graduate students and faculty alike demonstrate these outcomes, as the framework of teaching and learning supports them, as illustrated in Table 1.

## **Educational Leadership Program**

StudentName\_\_\_\_\_

| Conceptual Framework Tenets → ELCC (ISSLC) Standards ↓   | Academic Excellence  | Collaboration                                       | Diversity  | Lifelong Learning                                   |
|--|--|---|--|---|
| Standard 1.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school or district vision of learning supported by the school community. | 1.1 Develop a School Vision of Learning<br>1.2 Articulate a School Vision of Learning.<br>1.4 Steward a School Vision of Learning. | 1.5 Promote Community Involvement in School Vision. |  | 1.3 Implement a School Vision of Learning.          |
| Standard 2.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by promoting a positive school culture, providing an effective instructional   | 2.1 Promote a Positive School Culture. 2.3 Apply Best Practice to Student Learning.  | 2.3 Apply Best Practice to Student Learning.        | 2.1 Promote a Positive School Culture. 2.2 Provide Effective Instructional Program. 2.3 Apply Best Practice to Student Learning. | 2.4 Design Comprehensive Professional Growth Plans. |

|   |                                   |   |   |   |
|---|-----------------------------------|---|---|---|
| program, applying best practice to student learning, and designing comprehensive professional growth plans for staff.   |                                   |   |   |   |
| Standard 3.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by managing the organization, operations, and resources in a way that promotes a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. | 3.1 Manage the Organization.      | 3.2 Manage the Operations.  |   | 3.3 Manage the Resources.                     |
| Standard 4.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by collaborating with families  | 4.3 Mobilize Community Resources. | 4.1 Collaborate with Families and Other Community Members<br>4.2 Respond to Community Interests and Needs | 4.2 Respond to Community Interests and Needs. | 4.2 Respond to Community Interests and Needs. |



|  |  |   |                  |   |
|--|--|---|------------------|---|
| and other community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.  |  |   |                  |   |
| Standard 5.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairly, and in an ethical manner                               |  |   | 5.2 Acts Fairly. | 5.1 Acts with Integrity.5.2 Acts Fairly.5.3 Acts Ethically. |
| Standard 6.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, | 6.1 Understand the Larger Educational Context. | 6.2 Respond to the Larger Educational Context.6.3 Influence the Larger Educational Context. |                  | 6.3 Influence the Larger Educational Context.               |

|  |   |  |  |   |
|--|---|--|--|---|
| legal, and cultural context.   |   |  |  |   |
| Standard 7.0: Internship. The internship provides significant opportunities for candidates to synthesize and apply the knowledge and practice and develop the skills identified in Standards 1-6 through substantial, sustained, standards-based work in real settings, planned and guided cooperatively by the institution and school district personnel for graduate credit. | 7.3 Candidates apply skills and knowledge articulated in the first six ELCC standards as well as state and local standards for educational leaders. Experiences are designed to accommodate candidates' individual needs. |  |  | 7.3 Candidates apply skills and knowledge articulated in the first six ELCC standards as well as state and local standards for educational leaders. Experiences are designed to accommodate candidates' individual needs. |

Table 1: ELCC and Widener University Center for Education's Conceptual Framework Alignment

## Philosophy and the Use of a Professional Seminar Course

In order to provide students with a common ground on which to understand the philosophy and standards that drive our leadership programs, all students are required to take a seminar course titled Seminar in School Leadership. The seminar course is aligned directly with the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards and the Widener University Center for Education's Conceptual Framework.

The seminar course has as its focus the six ISLLC standards of Vision, School Culture, Management, Collaboration, Ethics and the Larger Context of Education. When studying the Vision standard, course content is related to developing, communicating, implementing and evaluating a vision for a school or a school district. The School Culture standard is involved with the leader's ability to create an environment conducive to learning for both students and staff and to have in the school or district a focus on teaching and learning. Students explore as part of their

work on this standard ways to value the diversity in the school and community. The School Management standard lends itself to working with students to understand all facets of school management and how to effectively manage a building, a program or a district. In this course, students work on real problems through the use of case studies to assist with the development of their collaboration and communication skills (Collaboration standard). The Ethics standard states that school leaders must treat all members of the school community with dignity, fairness and respect. This topic is prevalent throughout the work with all the standards. Finally, students must gain an understanding and awareness of the Larger Context of Education including the social, political, economic and legal aspects of society that have a great impact on education.

An assessment system has been developed for this course to assess students' knowledge, skills and dispositions related to the standards. To provide evidence of an initial awareness and in-depth understanding of the standards, students write an interpretation of each of the standards, develop an artifact related to the particular standard, and then write a reflection that provides the rationale for the artifact. Throughout the course, this author gives feedback to the students on their interpretations, artifacts, and reflections.

Student feedback on their work with the standards is given through the use of rubrics developed for each standard. The rubrics are aligned with the Center for Education's Conceptual Framework values of academic excellence, collaboration, diversity and lifelong learning, and the commitments to best practices and the use of technology.

It is also the intention of the instructor that throughout the course students will begin to develop their leadership philosophy as they work with the standards. One of the required readings for the course is *Leading with Soul* (Bolman and Deal, 2001). This particular book was chosen because of the authors' lessons on thinking about the "human side" of leadership. Class discussions of this particular book have shown students' ability to use higher level thinking skills and to examine their own values and beliefs so that they can then form their leadership philosophy based not only on the standards but also on their personal values. Students are given the opportunity to work on personal growth projects related to the knowledge gained through the study of the book.

## **The Electronic Portfolio**

The use of the electronic portfolio is in the infancy stage of development and usage in the leadership program at Widener University. The University has committed the resources necessary for the implementation of an electronic portfolio through the acquisition and support of the TaskStream software program. This software is user-friendly and is provided to faculty and students. It is the vision of the authors that students develop their electronic portfolio in the Seminar in School Leadership course, continue using the electronic portfolio when students complete their signature assessments in courses in their programs, and, finally, use the electronic portfolio to document their work in their culminating practicum or internship. The electronic portfolio is the technology tool that will be utilized to collect data and assess students' work on the standards throughout their leadership programs. The authors do not want the focus to be on the technology, but rather on the content of the electronic portfolios.

| ISLLC Standard 1 - Vision        |   |   |   |  |
|----------------------------------|---|---|---|--|
| CfE<br>Conceptual<br>Framework ↓ | Insufficient  | Emergent  | Proficient  | Distinguished  |
| Academic<br>Excellence           | The interpretation and reflection do not include the components of the standard                                     | The interpretation and reflection do not include discussion of all components of the standard                                       | The interpretation and reflection include discussion of all components of the standard                                      | The interpretation and reflection provide a thorough review of all components of the standard  |
| Collaboration                    | There is little or no evidence that any members of the school community were involved in the creation of the vision | There is limited evidence that the vision was developed based on input from representatives of appropriate members of the community | There is evidence that the vision was developed based on input from representatives of appropriate members of the community | There is clear and convincing evidence that the vision was developed based on input from representatives of appropriate members of the community |
| Diversity                        | The vision is not fair or equitable to all community members  | The vision is fair to all community members   | The vision is fair to all community members   | The vision is fair and equitable to all community members  |
| Lifelong Learning                | There is no reference to lifelong learning  | There is some indirect reference to lifelong learning   | There is reference to lifelong learning   | There is direct and clear reference to lifelong learning   |
| Best Practices                   | The vision is not feasible to implement   | The vision is somewhat feasible to implement  | The vision is feasible to implement   | The vision has a high level of feasibility for implementation  |

| ISLLC Standard 2 – School Culture |  |   |   |   |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|---|---|
| CfE<br>Conceptual<br>Framework    | Insufficient   | Emergent  | Proficient  | Distinguished   |
| Academic<br>Excellence            | The interpretation and reflection do not include the components of the school culture standard | The interpretation and reflection do not include all four components of the school culture standard | The interpretation and reflection include all four components of the school culture standard    | The interpretation and reflection provide a thorough review of all four components of the school culture standard |
| Collaboration                     | The artifact demonstrates no evidence of a collaborative culture in the school/district        | The artifact demonstrates limited evidence of a collaborative culture in the school/district        | The artifact demonstrates sufficient evidence of a collaborative culture in the school/district | The artifact demonstrates a high level of collaborative culture in the school/district                            |
| Diversity                         | There is no evidence of attention to diversity in the interpretation or reflection             | There is limited evidence of attention to diversity in the interpretation and reflection            | There is sufficient evidence of attention to diversity in the interpretation and reflection     | There is clear and convincing evidence of attention to diversity in the interpretation and reflection             |
| Life long<br>Learning             | There is no attention to the professional development of the staff                             | There is limited attention to the professional development of the staff                             | There is sufficient attention to the professional development of staff                          | There is a high level of attention to the professional development of staff                                       |
| Best<br>Practices                 | The artifact is not considered to the best practice  | The artifact contains some qualities of best practice   | The artifact demonstrates best practice   | The artifact demonstrates highly regarded practices   |

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## Core Competency Project

The Core Competency Project is administered during and at the conclusion of Special Issues in School Administration I & II. This two-semester course serves as a capstone for students seeking their superintendent certificate and their doctorate in educational leadership. Consistent with the Center's Conceptual Framework, students are required to complete a self-reflection of their level of competence in standard 1-3 of the ISLLC standards in the first semester and standards 4-6 the second semester. Students work in learning teams to discuss their personal assessments and to coach each other on ways they may demonstrate or enhance themselves in the components of the standards. After self-reflection and group collaboration, students identify one standard area they need to strengthen and complete a project to reinforce their knowledge, skills, and dispositions in that area. These courses are sequential and intended to be taken at the end of their certificate and degree program.

The learner outcomes for the core competency project are as follows: students will demonstrate their ability to research a topic in educational administration as evidenced by the quality and synthesis of sources used to complete the project; students will demonstrate their ability to verbally communicate a topic in educational administration as evidenced by their class presentation; students will demonstrate their ability to use effective instructional practices as evidenced by their time management and the materials they provide their classmates.

The Core Competency Project provides students with the opportunity to enhance their knowledge in an area related to school administration that they believe is important to their own leadership development and share that knowledge with their classmates. Their task is to search the available resources (internet, journals, experts in the field, etc.) that will enable them to build their level of competence in the core skill area select. An important component of the project is the presentation of their findings to their class in the form of a mini-workshop, thus enhancing their classmates' knowledge as well.

The following are required components of the project: (1) A statement of the problem being studied, (2) purpose of the project (3) review of the literature, (4) recommendations, and (5) an annotated bibliography of the major resources used to inform the recommendations and conclusions of the project.

The five required components of the project and the quality of presentation are evaluated using a scoring guide (insufficient, developing, proficient, accomplished) similar to the one recommended by Hessel and Holloway (2002) in **A framework for school leaders: Linking the ISLLC standards to practice.**

In addition to assessing individual student strengths and areas for growth, the data derived from this assessment will be used to strengthen district level leadership programs as well as provide important longitudinal data. Faculty will be able to modify program offerings and requirements based on observed areas that could be strengthened.

## Conclusions

There are several lessons that we have learned in our efforts to renew our school leadership program. We find that the success of any major reform initiative such as ours requires that outcomes and expectations be clearly understood from the beginning. "Begin with the end in mind," as Covey advises, by establishing a conceptual framework and set of professional standards that was essential to our progress. These profession standards (ISLLC) must be built into the system of learning and assessment and represent what we expect our graduates to achieve in their program. It is also important to engage students in the process during their initial introduction to the program. We do so by requiring them to take a seminar course during their first semester where they are introduced to our mission, conceptual framework and standards and begin to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and dispositions through their portfolios.

Fullan (2007) reminds us that introducing lasting change requires the cooperation and support of a variety of people. We are learning that our renewal will succeed only if there is commitment from the entire Center for Education community. This includes administration, full and part-time time faculty, support staff, and school district partners. In order to garner their support and cooperation, there needs to be a balance in work expectations and a system for rewarding those who take leading roles in implementing the changes.

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## Developing Relational Trust in Schools through a Consensus Process



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### Introduction

School improvement efforts that are at the heart of all schools' mission often do not establish the strong positive relationships between the adults in the school that are necessary for sustained successful efforts (Tye, 2000). "The relationship among the adults in the school house has more impact on the quality and the character of the schoolhouse – and the accomplishments of youngsters – than any other factor" (Barth, 2001, p. 105). Building on this finding, Bryk and Schneider's (2002) research established a positive correlation between student success academically and the presence of trusting relationships among adults in the school. This research notwithstanding, superintendents, school principals, and school staff members are hard-pressed to find specific methods or tools for developing these foundational relationships. Without the effective tools from which to approach school improvement, educators may well become overwhelmed. While not widely used or researched, consensus processes purport to be one of those needed tools. The purpose of this research is to address the question, "How do consensus processes foster the development of relational trust in schools?"

While much has been written about the development of learning communities in classrooms and schools, the role of relational trust in developing those positive learning and teaching relationships has received less attention. Few practices have been identified for school leaders as tools in developing trust between and among the stakeholders of a school community. Bryk and Schneider (2002) noted that “relational trust is forged in daily social exchanges” (p. 136). Kochanek (2005) describes strategies that put others at ease, remove barriers to trust, and provide opportunities for people to interact. Suggestions such as these describing what school leaders might do to develop positive, trusting relationships focus on the frequency, intent, substance, and necessity of human interactions in schools. They do not suggest, however, specific one-on-one or group processes for establishing relational trust.

At the heart of consensus processes is the development of trust through formal and informal social exchanges in an environment of listening with respect (R. Chadwick, Consensus Associates, personal communication, March 27, 2008). Little can be found in the literature identifying a link between consensus processes and relational trust, yet those involved in the use of this practice report heightened levels of trust as both a purpose and product of consensus practices (Eichler, 2007; Eller, 2004; Susskind, McKearnan & Thomas-Larmer, 1991).

## **The Meaning and Function of Relational Trust in Schools**

In their seminal study of 400 Chicago elementary schools, Bryk and Schneider (2002) found that growth and change are key components in the success of a school. They posited that the capacity to improve is shaped by the nature of the social exchanges and the local cultural features in the school. A broad base of trust is the “lubricant” (2002) that is necessary for a school’s day-to-day functioning and is a critical resource as leaders embark on ambitious improvement initiatives. Sebring and Bryk (2000) suggested that cooperative work relations in schools “requires a strong base of social trust among teachers, between teachers and parents, between teachers and the principal, and between teachers and students” (p.442). Through an analysis of existing research and their own work, Bryk and Schneider

identified “a dynamic interplay among four considerations: respect, competence, personal regard for others, and integrity” (p.23).

Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) describe the presence of interdependence in a trust relationship. They observe that where there is a reliance on one another, two or more parties are vulnerable to each other. Where vulnerability does not exist, trust is not needed. They defined trust as “one party’s willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is (a) benevolent, (b) reliable, (c) competent, (d) honest, (e) open” (p.556). Although these facets are independent of one another, they are interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (2003) found a positive correlation between high levels of trust in a school and a high level of teacher perceived efficacy. Self-efficacy is the belief of an individual regarding self capacity to achieve the desired level of attainment (Bandura, 1997). “When teachers trust each other, it is more likely that they will develop greater confidence in their collective ability to be successful at meeting their goals” (Tschannen-Moran, 2004, p.127). Distrust in the school setting, however, causes discomfort, leaving people feeling ill at ease (Fuller, 1996). Since learning is a cooperative process, distrust negatively affects cooperation and teachers’ tendency toward collaboration (Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

Having established the function and importance of trust in schools, the literature also provides guidance as how school leaders and other members of a school community can develop and maintain trusting relationships. Using the facets of trust established by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000), Tschannen-Moran (2004) described the attitudes and general behaviors that school administrators and staff members, the subject of this study, can adopt. It is suggested that the leadership functions that can lead to the development of trust are multidimensional and include visioning, modeling, coaching, managing, and mediating. Each of these functions is described in ways that suggest how a leader might act with special attention to sending the right message through those actions. One example provided in the area of modeling is that, “Effective school leaders not only know how to ‘talk the talk’ of trust, they also know how to ‘walk the talk’” (p. 177). In the area of coaching, an emphasis is placed on active listening. Advice for

newly appointed principals suggests that in this honeymoon period exists an opportunity for each party to “signal a willingness to extend trust and not to exploit the vulnerability of others” (p.58), as well as “communicate good will and caring toward each member of the school community” (p. 59).

In *Building Trust for Better Schools*, Kochanek’s (2005) focus is on leadership practices in elementary schools that build trust. This guide to principals suggests a developmental approach of communicating a vision, reshaping the faculty, fostering low-risk exchanges through small group interactions, using interactions to ease vulnerabilities, and then creating opportunities for high-risk interactions. Through these repeated exchanges, staff members build confidence in themselves and others resulting in greater trust in their relationships. Kochanek also explores which strategies are most effective in building trust. The steps offered for principals to build trust in schools are 1) put others at ease, 2) remove barriers to trust, and 3) provide opportunities for people to interact.

Kochanek asserts that the material offered, “presents a series of mechanisms that are useful in developing trust in a school community” (p.86). What are not found in the literature are the specific group process strategies that are readily accessible to school principals and other school leaders. “Even in the business literature, there are few serious comparative studies about how to build trust...” (Louis, 2008, p. 50). The question of what human interaction methodologies can be employed when the adults in a school experience low levels of trust characterized by a lack of collaboration or conflict is not answered.

## **Consensus Principles and Methods**

Consensus is defined by the dictionary as “general agreement or opinion” (Abate, 1998, p. 121). In consensus literature, this general definition is expanded to include the practice of consensus building and is described as “a cooperative process in which all group members develop and agree to support a decision that is in the best interest of the whole” (Dressler, 2006, p. 4). Beliefs that guide consensus and other group processes are as varied as the practitioners who offer field or handbooks on the various approaches to consensus building (Dressler, 2006; Eichler, 2007; Susskind, McKernan,

Thomas-Learner, 1991). Dressler notes that consensus is characterized by a cooperative search for solutions where disagreement is accepted as a positive force, every voice matters, and decisions are reached in the interest of the group. The core values of the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) contain inclusiveness, global scope, participation, celebration, innovative form, and social responsibility (Schuman, 2005).

These guiding principles of the consensus process are implemented using a wide-range of practices, methods, and techniques. Schuman (2005) suggests providing activities that share all relevant information, allow for individuals to explain their reasoning and intent, focus on interests rather than positions, combine advocacy and inquiry, allow for discussing undiscussable issues, ensure that every person is heard, and promote authentic listening. To guard against participants remaining silent and not being heard, Dressler suggests using a “round robin” approach that circles the room so everyone speaks (2006). While there is surprisingly no discussion by Dressler (2006) of the physical set up for a group consensus activity except by reference to the “round robin” approach, it is perhaps no accident that the front cover photograph of his book *Consensus through Conversation* features a bird’s eye view of twelve participants sitting in a circle. Management consultant and author, Peter Block, provides clear direction for the physical set up group conversations by stating that, “Community is built when we sit in circles” (p. 151).

Absent from the available handbooks and training material is a reporting of research that confirms the stated effects of the application of consensus building practices. While the IAF handbook suggests methods for gaining and building trust, it does not provide verification that the suggested facilitation practices actually result in increased trust levels among participants (Schuman, 2005).

The importance of facilitation skills is well established. In the original Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium: Standards for School Leaders (1996), Standard 1 calls for the school administrator to have the knowledge and understanding of “effective consensus-building and negotiations skills” (p. 10). In regards to both the development of relational trust and the use of consensus practices, the newly revised Educational

Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008, retains standards that call for educational leaders to have the necessary knowledge and skills for creating and implementing plans to achieve goals; collaborating with staff and community members; developing a capacity for distributed leadership; and building and sustaining positive and productive relationships. The importance of each of these functions is well established in the successful leadership of our schools. The more that is known about specific strategies and techniques for developing and fostering relational trust in schools, the more accessible those tools can be made to school administrators and their staff members.

Few specific strategies for developing relational trust in schools have been identified for school leaders. Concurrently, there is a paucity of research demonstrating that the consensus process is one method of developing trusting relationships. This study was intended to identify strategies that, when used, fostered the development of strong, positive relationships in schools.

## **Methodology and Research Design**

A collective case study design bounded by one school was used to explore the consensus processes' fostering the development of relational trust. The principal from a suburban elementary school with a history of using a consensus process, and six staff members from the same school participated in semi-structured interviews. The superintendent and one additional elementary principal from the same school district were also interviewed to provide additional context and process information. The transcripts of the interviews were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) to form an understanding of how consensus processes foster relational trust within a school culture.

The participating administrators described what consensus practices were used in their school or school district, how they were implemented, and their observations of the impact of those practices on the relationships of those involved. The staff members were asked for the same information, but focused exclusively on a full-day work session that addressed space and scheduling problems rising out of full-day kindergarten implementation and



conflict resolution practices used in their school. For the purpose of this study, the school was referred to as Lincoln School.

After being asked to describe the relationships they have experienced and observed between staff members, parents, and themselves, all interviewees were asked if the consensus practices they identified using or experiencing affected the way people interacted with one another. Affirmative answers were followed by inquiries into what relational and behavioral changes they experienced or observed. The administrators were also asked to describe how they felt their use of and experience with consensus practices in their school or school district had changed the way they perceived and approached their work.

Although the development of relational trust using consensus strategies was the focus of the interviews, the questions did not inquire directly about trust or trust relationships in the schools. Follow-up questions concerning trust and consensus techniques were asked when, in the course of answering a prepared question, the interviewee referred to trust relationships or any of the facets of trust as identified by Bryk and Schneider (2002) or Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000). In such cases, the interviewees' vocabulary was used in the follow-up questions in an effort to avoid leading the staff members' responses. Since the administrators were familiar with the vocabulary describing various consensus strategies, they were asked to list them and describe their use in their schools. The other staff members, however, were less familiar with the consensus vocabulary and were asked to describe the group processing methods used during the work session on full-day kindergarten and those used in conflict resolution.

The recorded interviews were transcribed and subjected to a constant comparative method of analysis. Repeated readings of the transcripts lead to the identification of emerging themes within and between the interviews. A coding system incorporating the themes was used to label statements that described the consensus methods used, reasons or motives for using consensus practices, relational and behavioral experiences and observations, and the connections made by the interviewees between the consensus methods used and the reported effects on relationships and behavior.

## Emerging Themes on Consensus and the Development of Relational Trust

The primary focus of the interviews in this collective case study was the elementary school. The participants consisted of two elementary principals, their superintendent, and six staff members from one of the principal's schools in a suburban school district of approximately 8,000 students, kindergarten through 12th grade. The staff members' school – Lincoln Elementary School - had an enrollment of 525 students. Table 1 provides participant descriptions using gender consistent pseudonyms.

Table 1

### Participant Descriptions

| Name                   | Position          | Years Experience (current position) |
|------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Administrators:        |                   |                                     |
| Allen                  | Superintendent    | 11                                  |
| Barbara                | Belmont Principal | 8                                   |
| Carolyn                | Lincoln Principal | 7                                   |
| Lincoln Staff Members: |                   |                                     |
| Ellie                  | Second Grade      | 2                                   |

|         |                      |    |
|---------|----------------------|----|
|         | Teacher              |    |
| Francis | School Psychologist  | 7  |
| Gayle   | Third Grade Teacher  | 20 |
| Helen   | Librarian            | 7  |
| Irene   | Health Room Para     | 2  |
| Jack    | Fourth Grade Teacher | 4  |

The purpose to which the consensus process was applied in the two principals' schools varied to the same degree as the many demands that are placed on schools and their personnel. Two broad categories of application that appeared in the interviews were planning/decision-making efforts and conflict resolution. Using the consensus model, Lincoln's principal took a collaborative approach as the staff members worked to resolve the scheduling and space issues associated with accommodating full-day kindergarten.

In reference to the consensus process and planning/decision-making activities, the superintendent in this study noted that administrators were being asked to engage in school improvement planning with the assumption that they knew how to do it. "What I realize now is over the years I probably wasn't providing enough assistance and training and support for those who I was asking to facilitate those planning sessions." With training in the consensus model, he pointed out that the school administrators have tools to facilitate the gathering of input, conduct research, and make decisions.

Both principals reported facilitating in conflict situations, whether between staff members or staff members and parents. This was accomplished using

consensus strategies that identified issues, potential resolution, and working toward a plan. Whether in the context of planning/decision-making or conflict resolution, the studies' participants repeatedly referenced the following consensus strategies they used or in which they participated:

1. Sitting in a circle.
2. Going around the circle to gather input.
3. Listening to one another, sometimes having designated listeners.
4. Giving everyone an opportunity to speak in turn, often referred to as "getting their voice in the room."
5. Identifying and recording all suggested alternatives and solutions.

Strategies mentioned only by the study's administrative participants included:

1. Serving as a facilitator, the person who guides the process.
2. Identifying "worst and best outcomes," two recorded lists of all the worst and the best outcomes the participants can imagine that might come out of the process or discussion in which they are involved.
3. Repeating or reading back input, often done by the "listener."
4. Providing each participant an opportunity to agree or disagree.
5. Asking those who disagree how the idea can be changed so they can agree.
6. Talking or listening sessions, intended to provide a venue for participants to express themselves (get their voice in the room) and for the hosts or organizers of the session to hear (be the listeners) what they have to say.

Strategies that were listed by the Lincoln staff members only were:

1. Using small groups for various conversations within the process.
2. Establishing ground rules for group processes.

The common themes and associated sub-themes related to the consensus processes used by the participant administrators and experienced by the Lincoln staff members that emerged in the course of this study are:

- The emergence of trust and the facets of trust as defined by Bryk and Schneider (2002) and Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) resulting from the use of the consensus strategies.
- The value in the development of relationships of listening to and being heard by others.
- The emergence of collaboration and empowerment resulting from the use of consensus strategies, frequently described as consequences of hearing and being heard.

## **Trust and Facets of Trust**

While the emergence of relational trust resulting from consensus practices was not a direct inquiry in the interview questions, each administrator and two of the Lincoln teachers observed the development of trust in the adult relationships in their schools as a consequence of these practices. Put plainly, the superintendent stated, “I think it builds relationships. I think it builds trust.” Supporting that contention, one of the teachers commented, “...you feel validated and you feel that you can trust me...and so, I know I can do the same with you.” The other themes that emerged in the interviews were expressed using terminology associated with trust in the literature.

The interviewees used other terms describing relational conditions throughout the interviews. They reported that school participants in consensus processes felt valued and validated. They spoke of respect and feeling comfortable to speak up. They described the sense of appreciation and welcoming that accompanied the use of consensus strategies. They noted consensus participants feeling good about what they were doing and believing there was a way to participate in meaningful decisions. These descriptors of the effects of consensus were often associated with high levels of collaboration and empowerment fueled by high participation rates. These two effects are linked to a willingness to take responsibility and commit time and effort in pursuit of goals. Each of these reported effects of the consensus process are linked directly to relational trust or its facets as described in the literature (Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

## **Listening and Being Heard**

A second prominent theme in this study's interviews was the importance and value of providing teachers, parents and others in the school community the opportunities to listen and to be heard. The interviewees described the effects of consensus activities that allowed all participants in a process to be heard – “get their voices in the room” – and the act of genuinely listening for understanding. From the listening perspective, common among the interviewees was the belief that genuine listening brought about better understanding. The results of this understanding were a greater appreciation for the other person's position, thereby reducing conflict by raising the sense of regard for others.

From the standpoint of being heard or “getting your voice in the room,” staff members reported that the experience of being heard in a meaningful manner resulted in their feeling respected and that the absence of listening and being heard is indicative of the lack of trust. Gayle, a third grade teacher declared, “...my ideas were respected and we talked about them and I was allowed to express them.” Although each staff member reported benefits to both the listeners and speakers when engaged in the consensus strategies reported in this study, the most prevalent aspect of these human interactions was the benefit derived from the perspective of the speaker when they were genuinely being heard by others. The second grade teacher, Ellie observed that, “When I listen to you, you feel validated and you feel that you can trust me because I am listening to you.”

When used for both decision-making and conflict resolution, opportunities for hearing and being heard promote frequent, positive, and productive human exchanges. By virtue of the consensus process interactions, however, the administrators observed effects that go beyond the personal responses of gaining understanding and respect. They noted the emergence of two key ingredients of professional learning communities: collaboration and empowerment (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

## **Collaboration and Empowerment**

The third theme emerging from the interviews was the interrelated notions of collaboration and empowerment. All three administrators expressed the belief that the consensus methods used in their schools created a collaborative environment that empowered teachers in addressing school

issues. These two ideas combined as the results of consensus experiences and were seen as often being the consequence of the “listening and being heard” theme described above. Authentic listening was perceived by the administrators as a tool for involving all participants. Allen observed, “I think the listening piece really, levels the playing field ...and really empowers everybody to participate, even our reluctant speakers or people who are reluctant to share, fairly quickly get comfortable.” A teacher, Helen, concurs when recalling the mood of those who assembled during the kindergarten session to resolve the difficult problem of scheduling. She stated, “I recall people came in ready for action, ready to work, ready to solve a problem.”

Sub-themes that emerged from both the administrators and Lincoln staff members are found in both the listening/being heard and collaboration/empowerment themes noted above. These can best be described as the mechanics of the consensus process, and the process expectations that develop from them. Both administrators and Lincoln staff members spoke of the importance of “the circle.” The staff members place significance on the aspects of the consensus process that included working in small groups, setting ground rules, and making lists of participant input. Because of their initial experiences with the consensus strategies, the Lincoln staff members described the development of specific expectations they had of the process. These major and sub-themes played a significant role in the participants’ thinking about, use of, and response to the various consensus strategies described in this study.

## **Discussion and Implications**

The findings in this study provide support for its assertion that consensus processes contribute to the development of relational trust in schools. The most common consensus strategies associated with the development of trust were those that promoted authentic listening and the experience of being heard. The contributions of listening and being heard made to the development of relational trust are well established in the literature. Clearly, the consensus model contributed to the development of relational trust in these schools.

The consensus practices of going around the circle to insure everyone has an opportunity to speak; assigning a listener; listing all responses word for word and reading them back; and seeking agreement through discussions of similarities and differences are designed to achieve good listening and candid expressions of thought. The Lincoln staff members reported that the consensus strategies with which they had experience accomplished just that. Participants genuinely listen and thereby gain a deeper understanding and regard for others. Individuals being listened to respond with a sense of belonging, personal responsibility, and a desire to be a part of the task at hand. These, in turn, result in greater collaboration and a heightened sense of self and collective efficacy. Taken together, the responses to the consensus process strategies described in this study constitute the development of relational trust.

As observed by the superintendent, Allen, we should not assume that our school leaders possess the necessary knowledge and skills to foster and maintain the trusting relationships that result in higher student achievement. Nor should we assume that teachers, support staff, and parents are aware of how to participate in basic human interactions in ways that foster trusting relationships. The consensus practices described in this study offer promising and accessible tools for those intricately involved in schools in developing strong learning communities and, in fact, communities of leaders. It is within these learning communities that higher student achievement will be realized (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). The specific strategies described here are available to school leaders through training from consultants and abundant print resources. While it is true that many school leaders already possess and practice the skills necessary to build trusting relationships in their schools, training and attention to these strategies can hone those skills in ways that will result in even greater effectiveness. For those lacking these skills, consensus processes provide the structure and focus needed to develop new skills and focus attention on effective group processes. If the acquisition of these consensus strategies has the effect on other school leaders as it did on Carolyn, the Lincoln School principal, this approach to group processing has the potential of transforming how our schools are operated. Commenting on her experience with the consensus approach, Carolyn stated, “It profoundly affected the way I worked with people in this school.” It is her staff members’



observations of the relational effects of the consensus strategies that appear in this study.

The encouraging results of this research aside, additional inquiry into the use and effect of consensus practices in schools is warranted. A mixed methods study with school groups – a school, school committee, or organization - can assist in establishing the efficacy of consensus strategies in developing relational trust as well as further the understanding of how these practices contribute to this phenomenon. Future research should contribute to the toolbox of skills and strategies necessary for effective group and school leadership. In doing so, the fundamental purpose of this work in improving student achievement can be met.

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## Superheroes or SAMs? A Change in Practice for a New Kind of Educational Leader



**Note:** This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of education administration. Author: **Jan Walker, Associate Professor, Department of Educational Leadership, Drake University**

### **The Multiple Demands and Job Expansion of the Leader-Manager**

Historically, the principal's role was typically that of manager, a concept derived from management principles first applied to industry and commerce and adopted by the educational system (Bush, 2008). The responsibilities of the leader-manager included maintaining safe buildings, overseeing the budget, completing and submitting reports, complying with regulations and mandates, coping with personnel issues, and dealing with parents (Portin, Shen, & Williams, 1998). Being a good building manager was once sufficient, but the principal's role has expanded. The job today necessitates the emergence of a new kind of leader with the focus shifting from accountability for how resources are expended to include accountability for student achievement (Cooley & Shen, 2003).

Effective schools research in the 1980s essentially gave birth to the connection between the school leader and student achievement and recent studies of successful schools continue to connect strong school instructional leadership to higher student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2000; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Although the need

for both instructional leadership and management exists, the conflicting demands and layering of responsibilities have dramatically impacted the role of the principal (Chirichello, 2003; DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Duffie, 1991; Portin et al., 1998).

Due to the increased level of responsibilities, the principal's job extends to 60-80 hours per week and includes supervision of weekend and evening activities (Cushing, Kerrins, Johnstone, 2003; DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Ferrandino & Tirozzi, 2000; Pierce, 2000; Yerkes & Guaglianone, 1998). In 1995 the Association of Washington School Principals (Portin et al., 1998) conducted a statewide survey of their membership to determine the changes in the educational environment and their influence on work life of principals. Over 90% of the respondents reported an increase in the scope of their responsibilities. More specifically, 83% indicated increased interactions with parents, 77% said they had greater numbers of students requiring services, and 81% said there had been a substantial increase in managerial responsibilities. Approximately 90% of the principals in this study indicated they spent more hours in their job now than they did five years ago. Many of the principals reported feelings of frustration and were less enthusiastic about their jobs.

## **Prioritizing Responsibilities and Creating Tension**

The time devoted to all aspects of the job creates a tension caused by a limited amount of time (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). As Darling-Hammond, La Pointe, Myerson, and Orr (2007) contend, "They must be educational visionaries and change agents, instructional leaders, curriculum and assessment experts, budget analysts, facility managers, special program administrators, and community builders" (p.1).

Principals are concerned about the growing responsibilities for both manager and instructional leader and note the increasing amount of time spent on managerial tasks versus instructional leadership tasks (Shen & Crawford, 2003; Worner & Stokes, 1987). Principals believe the instructional role, more than the managerial role, influences student learning (Leitner, 1994); however, day-to-day managerial operations usurp much of the time (Cunard, 1990; IEL, 2000). In fact, principals are

spending less than one-third of their increasing work week on curriculum and instructional activities (Cooley & Shen, 2003; Eisner, 2002; Goodwin, Cunningham & Childress, 2003; Schiffe, 2002). Most school leaders did not become principals to be managers and see these roles as a disconnect (Donmoyer & Wagstaff, 1990; Goodwin et al., 2003; Portin et al., 1998). If the importance of academic accountability is increasing in our schools, the principals need to be spending more time with instructional responsibilities. Clearly, instructional leadership is a priority honored more by its ranking than its actual execution (Worner & Stokes, 1987).

### **Viable Reform Solution: School Administration Manager**

Districts have been exploring various solutions (Cushing, Kerrins, & Johnstone, 2003; Grubb & Flessa, 2006) to the leadership-management dilemma. The message from this study is clear: The principal cannot do the job alone. Principals cannot execute the job single-handedly (Leithwood et al., 2004; Spillane, 2005); they rely on the contributions of others. Elmore (2000) believes that in knowledge-intensive environments there is no way to perform the many complex tasks without distributing the leadership responsibilities. Distributing the leadership responsibilities is about enhancing the skills and knowledge of people in the organization, and holding people accountable to the common goal. Distributive leadership models include: teacher-leaders, principal-teachers, assistant or associate principals, co-principals, or management or services coordinators (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). Management or services coordinator is a model that is becoming more familiar in many districts across the nation with noted success relative to the principal's efficiency and student achievement.

### **Kentucky's Alternative School Administration Study**

In 2002 the Wallace Foundation launched a project called the Alternative School Administration Study (ASAS) with three elementary schools in Louisville, Kentucky. The purpose of the project was to examine the use of principal time and the conditions that prevented school leaders from making instructional leadership their priority. The project is a strategy or process

referred to as School Administration Managers (SAMS) and designed to restructure the role of the principal, originating from the need to assist principals to work more effectively and efficiently. By reorganizing the work day of the principal, instructional leaders had more time to work directly with teachers and students on instructional issues. The premise of the program is to change the current practice of the instructional leader by freeing up some of the management time to increase the time for instruction. In turn, this new structure should result in stronger organizations with improved classroom instruction, greater student engagement, and improved student achievement.

When the project began in Kentucky, principals were working an average of 10 hours a day with approximately 67%-87% of that time spent on management concerns, with only 12.7%-29.7% spent on instructional issues. The time-use studies in these schools demonstrated that once principals were given guidance on how to shift their priorities away from managerial tasks, they were able to spend more time on instructional tasks. Three years after adopting the ASAS program, principals in the Louisville schools spent over 70% of their time on instructional issues and student achievement rate of gain increased (Shellinger, 2005).

In addition to the achievement data, responses from surveys of parents, students and teachers demonstrated a dramatic improvement in the visibility and interaction of the principal. One year after the implementation of SAMs, almost 50% of the students' perception of the principal's role focused on supervising instruction, which is nearly eight times the number of students who had a similar perception before involvement with the SAM project. Similarly, 45% of parents recognized student achievement as the primary role of principals compared to only 6% a year earlier. Teachers' perceptions mirrored those of the students and parents with almost 80% of the teachers noting that their principal was more engaged in instruction with the involvement of the SAM program.

## **Expansion of SAMs**

The results in Kentucky have piqued the interest of educators nationwide. The Wallace Foundation now supports replication of the SAMs process in

nine states (Iowa, Illinois, New York, Georgia, Delaware, Texas, Missouri, and California), and in more than 40 districts and over 200 schools. As the SAM project continues to expand across the country, the project may look different in each district. Primarily identified as a change process, SAM has evolved into four different models allowing districts to adopt the model that best suits their needs while focusing on principal/instructional time. Two of the models include full time personnel, either a person whose position is new to the building or a person whose position has been converted to a SAM. The third model does not involve additional personnel but assigns duties to an existing position, while the fourth model employs periodic data-driven analyses of time use. Each of the four models imposes restructuring the principal's time through deliberate and consistent time analysis.

## **Iowa's SAM: Overview**

At the start of the 2007-2008 school year, four Iowa public school districts incorporated the SAM project with 10 principals/ SAMs teams at the elementary, middle school and high school levels. By the end of the 2007-2008 school year, 10 more principal/SAM teams were added for a total of 21 teams in seven districts. For districts interested in participating in the SAM project, there were three requirements: (a) to collect baseline and annual data describing the use of the principal's time, (b) to conduct daily meetings for the SAM and the principal, and (c) to hold monthly meetings with the SAM, the principal and the SAM Coach.

## **Baseline and Annual Data**

Trained outside observers shadowed the principals using Time/Track Analysis © for an average of six hours a day for five days, documenting their time in five minute increments and coding for instructional and managerial behaviors. The baseline data are used by the SAM and principal throughout the year during daily conversations. With the use of TimeTrack©, the SAM periodically tracks and monitors the principal's time and compares the data to the earlier baseline data. Frequent monitoring helps the principal develop more efficient time management behaviors. After a year in the program, trained observers will again collect and code



the data to measure the principal's use of time and to compare to the original data.

### **Daily Meetings and Review of Instructional and Non-Instructional Activities**

Daily collaboration between the principal and the SAM is imperative for strengthening communication and improving the principal's efficiency. Reflecting on their time/task information, principals work to increase the time they spend as instructional leaders. Daily meetings include: review of monthly goals, discussion of the previous day's specific activities and incidents, tracking the principal's use of time spent on instructional and on non-instructional issues, calendar items and future plans.

SAMs in each district operate somewhat differently due to the unique school situation and because of their backgrounds. While the building principal must be a fully licensed administrator, the educational background and previous training of the SAMs varies. The managerial tasks assigned to the SAMs are contingent on many factors including: their educational background; their personality and talents; their previous experiences and skills; and their leadership style. In addition, responsibilities are delegated according to the number of students in a building, the grade level of students, the types of programming available in the building, and special projects in the building such as construction or fund-raising.

Tasks generally classified as instructional and dealing with educational issues may involve student work and supervision, employee supervision, observation and walk throughs, feedback, parent conversations, decision making committee work, teaching/modeling, professional development, planning, curriculum and assessment, and celebration. Management tasks are those dealing with the non-instructional issues: student discipline and supervision, employee discipline and supervision, office work, building management, parents, district meetings, and celebration.

### **Monthly Conversations**

Meetings are held monthly with the SAM/principal team and the state's SAM Time Change Coach to review data, discuss progress, needs and

challenges that have surfaced, or plan for future activities. The Coach is responsible to keep in close contact with the SAMs and principals and to assist other districts beginning to implement the program.

### **Year One of Implementation**

A three-day training session in the fall of 2007 marked the beginning of the project for the 10 principals and their SAMs. After several months of implementation of the SAM project, an electronic survey was sent to participating principals in the early spring and initial impressions were gathered regarding the early impact of the SAMs project. The survey, consisting of six open-ended questions, requested input relative to the decision to become involved in the project and how the work life had changed since the SAM began in their buildings. Information was collected from the principals regarding major tasks assigned to the SAM, noticeable changes in the school's operation and in the execution of their job, and potential gains for the future with continued participation in the SAM program. Seventy percent of the principals responded to the survey.

### **Survey Results**

The responses were received from principals at the elementary, middle level and high school level with 71% having been involved with the SAM project for 6-7 months, while one principal had been involved 8-9 months. The majority of principals (67%) had enrollments between 400-599 students and approximately 57% of the principals had between 7-10 years of administrative experience.

Responses indicated the inauguration of the SAM project was a decision made by both the superintendents (86%) and principals (86%) in the districts, while over half (57%) said the boards of education also had initial involvement with the decision. Reasons for participating in the project centered on refocusing the principal's responsibilities in order to spend more time on instructional tasks and less time on management and ultimately to improve student achievement. One principal stated, "Our Superintendent saw this as a great opportunity to help Principals focus on student achievement and to remove many of the management tasks off our plate."

Prior to their involvement with SAMs, principals found little time for classroom instruction. The most time-consuming and stressful part of their fragmented day dealt with attempting to satisfy everyone's needs while negotiating complicated discipline issues, leaving limited time for instructional visits. Comments from the principals included:

1. "Probably the most stressful part of my day was the daily grind of trying to balance instructional leadership with ongoing student/staff issues that occurred. The day was a series of starts and stops. There was no flow to the day. I basically went from one fire to the next..."
2. With less than a full school year into the program for most principals, many (57%) indicated that there had been changes in the building's operations and in their roles as principals:
3. "We definitely have noticed a change in attitudes towards the principal's role and involvement in the school. I would also say that the principal's day has vastly changed. I know that I now live by my daily schedule."
4. "I have at least doubled my time on instructional tasks over a 4-month period...I talk to students about what they are doing in the classroom. I am aware of student issues related to frustrations in the classroom. Most importantly, I have changed my thinking. My focus is an instructional leader."
5. "Instruction and staff development is an improved focus for our staff as a result of the SAM taking on tasks that free up the Principal's time."
6. "Paperwork and phone calls I am not bothered with."
7. "I am doing less discipline."

The tasks for which SAMs were responsible include discipline, transportation, athletics, administering of standardized testing, office procedures and paper handling, supervision of students, classified staff, facilities issues, development of the schedule, and communication with parents. Approximately 86% of the respondents reported that SAMs were instrumental in handling student supervision and discipline, while over 40% noted SAMs were responsible for both the supervision of staff and office work.

Most of the principals (67%) hoped to gain increased student performance with the continued involvement in the SAMs project. Others indicated (43%) greater time in the areas of planning, curriculum, instruction and assessment and professional development. One administrator responded:

To create a culture of continued adult growth helps enhance the learning experiences that each student receives at our school. This improvement creates a learning community where all students experience success and growth while feeling connected to our school.

### **Looking To the Future with SAMs**

Results of the project have been favorable, and reactions from students, teachers, parents and administrators have been positive. In the second year, data collectors will shadow the principals to gather comparison data to the baseline data. Academic gains will be reviewed using Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) and Iowa Test for Educational Development (ITED) scores. The programs, however, will have been in operation for only a year and little may be derived from this early analysis. The initial reaction has been a selling point for other districts; the number of principal/SAM teams is growing with the potential to reach 25 teams at the end of the 2008-2009 school year.

In addition, the Wallace Foundation has contracted with Policy Studies Associates (PSA) to study the impact of implementation across the country. The PSA's report will be issued in June, 2009, and will be a useful tool for Iowa and other participating states as they assess their progress and look to the future.

### **Conclusions**

The job of the school leader demands restructuring. Rather than continuing with the "superhero" image that is clearly unrealistic, the school leader structure needs to change. Typical responses to the need for change have included either a focus on recruitment of strong leaders capable of magically balancing myriad tasks or demanding preparation programs prepare the candidates for jobs that are becoming impossible (Grubb &

Flessa, 2006). Such recommendations ignore the real problem and divert the discussion from the possibility of restructuring the principal's practice.

Ultimately, boards of education must be convinced of the importance of restructuring balanced against its potential costs. They must reexamine the responsibilities of the principal, narrow the focus of the role, and encourage the school leader to abandon managerial tasks. Incorporating the SAM process may mean the principal will have more time to spend on curriculum, more time for quality communication and less time spent on paper work; it might well improve student achievement. Although the results of this new structural relationship are pending further exploration and research, principals can change the use of their time; time is not a barrier to quality instructional leadership.

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## What Every Educator Should Know About No Child Left Behind and the Definition of Proficient



**Note:** This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of education administration. Author: **Cheryl James-Ward, Assistant Professor, Educational Leadership Department, San Diego State University**

**A testing standard that says getting 33 percent of the questions right is a passing grade teaches all the wrong lessons to the kids – and to those who are suppose to be educating them. Yet New Jersey has been setting the mark as low as that for the tests that are used to judge student proficiency and school performance under the federal No Child Left Behind program (Mooney J., 2008, p. E14).**

### **Background**

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), ratified December 12, 2001, states that all public schools receiving Title 1 funds must make adequate yearly progress and that by the year 2014, all students must be proficient. Section 1001 of the NCLB Act, states, “The purpose of this title (Title 1) is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency in challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (NCLB Act of 2001, 2002, p. 17).

By participating in Title I, a program that funds in excess of \$12 billion annually to eligible schools and districts, states agree to commit themselves

to bringing all students to proficiency in language arts and math by 2014. In order to determine if schools and districts are on-track to meet this goal, the NCLB law mandates that each state set benchmark goals to measure whether schools and districts are making “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP) toward teaching all students what they need to know (Ed Trust West, 2003). Hence, every state is mandated to create an accountability system, each with its own set of standards and aligned benchmark assessments.

## **The Problem with No Child Left Behind**

Schools and districts across the nation that fail to make adequate yearly progress are subject to a number of sanctions, including letters mailed home to parents informing them of the students’ performance, school choice options, community advisory groups, curriculum and instruction mandates, school closure, reconstitution, state takeover, and removal of principal and/or teachers. As a result, some states have responded by changing how their tests are scored to allow more students to pass and to show more progress under NCLB (Fuller, Gesicki, Kang, & Wright, 2006).

NCLB mandates that proficiency be defined in the narrow terms of reading/English language arts and mathematics, requiring states to develop standards and benchmarks to assess students’ progress toward mastering standards in these specific content areas. To avoid Program Improvement status<sup>[\[footnote\]](#)</sup>, many inner-city schools have opted to forgo art, writing, music, and language curricula. They hope that by spending all their time on reading and math, children will be able to score proficient on the California standards tests (CSTs). Unfortunately, by doing so children are losing out on other important curricula areas. Vital attributes needed to be proficient in a global society – bilingualism, creativity, innovativeness – permeate inner-city schools, but developing these qualities are shunned in favor of preparing kids to reach cut scaled scores.

In California, Program Improvement (PI) is the formal designation for Title I-funded schools and Local Education Agencies that fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress for two consecutive years.

The Act punishes schools in some states for achievement levels that are defined as great successes in others and rewards schools in other states for

achievement levels significantly below national standards. Additionally, the repercussions of the NCLB's narrowly defined terms of proficient can be extremely detrimental in inner city schools where resources and time may be focused on passing the test, thereby reducing instructional minutes directed toward developing critical thinking skills, well-roundedness, innovativeness, creativity, and multilingualism (K. P. Boudett, et. al., 2007).

## **Literature Review**

The ultimate goal of NCLB is a steady academic gain by all subgroups of students until all can read and do math at or above grade level expectations. Some of the most notable characteristics of the law are 1) accountability requirements by which schools must demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress based on students reaching targets for achievement; 2) consequences for schools failing to meet AYP along with options for students in these schools to receive supplemental educational services and transportation to higher performing or safer schools within the same district; 3) application of rigorous scientifically based research standards to educational programs and practices; and 4) requirements that teachers and paraprofessionals must meet the highly qualified educational and credential criteria to remain in the classroom (Mills, 2008).

While NCLB requires all students to be proficient in math and reading by the year 2014, it also allows each state to create statewide testing programs and to determine their own level of proficiency (Peterson & Hess, 2006). Because NCLB allows the states to determine the content of these tests and what constitutes proficiency, researchers have already noted a pattern whereby states lower passing thresholds and otherwise “dumb down” state tests to achieve increased proficiency and avoid federal sanctions (Hickok & Ladner, 2007; Greene, Winters, & Forster, 2003). Some educators argue that states can manipulate the test results by lowering the bar that determines the cut scores for the proficient category, thereby allowing more students to pass (Shakrani, 2007). Because much of education policy and practice has historically been left to the states, there are variations in the level of rigor in both the scope of content standards and the meaning of test results (Mills, 2008, p. 13).

Many education experts and business groups say a patchwork of state standards are inefficient and ineffective because it prevents reliable or valid comparisons between states on core academic areas of mathematics, science, and English. They contend that students in states with low standards will have trouble competing in the global economy or in post secondary education (Shakrani, 2007).

### **The Ambiguity of Proficiency**

The national and state accountability systems clearly delineate the numerical targets necessary to earn Adequate Yearly Progress. However, the specific domains covered in state tests vary dramatically (Fuller, Gesicki, Kang, & Wright, 2006); moreover, the performance standards upon which these targets are based remain unclear. For example, the California Department of Education (CDE) purports that to be proficient in English or math, students in grades 2 through 8 must achieve scores of 350 or higher on state content standards tests ranging from 150-600. Even though this numerical target is clear, when California's definition of proficient is measured against that of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the state's definition of proficient falls short. The California Department of Education reports that in 2007, 51% of the state's 4th graders were proficient in English language arts and 56% of them were proficient in math. In contrast, The National Assessment of Educational Progress<sup>[footnote]</sup> (NAEP) Report for 2007 indicates that only 23% of California's 4th graders scored proficient in reading and 29% in math. This disparity does not exist just in California. States have long shown a much higher percentage of proficient students compared to NAEP results (Fuller et al., 2006).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) presents a comprehensive view of what students in the United States know and can do in the areas of reading and math. The tests are administered in grades 4 and 8. Scale scores ranges from 0 to 500 for both content areas with cut scores set at 238 and 281 relatively for reading and 249 and 299 for grades 4 and 8 in math.

If we take a broader look at states across the nation, we find that proficiency has multiple meanings. In some states, proficiency means that students are

meeting national standards in accordance with NAEP. In others, it means that students are barely performing at what some would consider basic levels. A level of performance considered proficient in one state could be labeled one notch lower, or basic in another (Mills, 2008).

To dig deeper into this premise, four states from across the nation were selected from each quadrant of the nation for reasons of comparison. The spring 2007 state tests results for 4th and 8th graders in the areas of reading/English language arts and math from each of the chosen states were compared to the NAEP 2007 math and reading tests results. Test components used to measure reading skills include reading for literary experience, reading for information, and context reading to perform a task. Reading for literary experience is measured with fictional texts that include stories and poetry. Reading for information is measured with articles and textbook material. Reading to perform a task is measured with documents and procedural materials (Education U. S., National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007). The state assessments used for this comparison are from the California Standardized Testing and Reporting System, Colorado Student Assessment Program, Georgia Criterion Reference Tests, Michigan Educational Assessment Program, and the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. Each state in the comparison group uses a battery of assessments also designed to measure reading skills for literay experience, reading for information and functional texts.

Nationally, 41% of all 4th graders scored proficient or advanced on the NAEP and 38% scored proficient or above in the area of math. Nationwide, 29% of all tested 8th graders scored proficient or advanced in reading on the NAEP, and 31% scored proficient or advanced in math. All 50 states and 2 jurisdictions (i.e., the District of Columbia and Department of Defense schools) participated in the 2007 NAEP reading and mathematics assessments (Education U. S., National Center for Educaitonal Statistics, 2007). The comparison data for grades 4 and 8 are presented in the two tables below.

Table 1

**Percent of 4th Grade Proficient Students – Comparison of State Test Results in Reading and Math to NAEP Test Results**

| State         | State's<br>Results<br>in<br>Reading | NAEP<br>Results<br>in<br>Reading | State's<br>Results<br>in Math | NAEP<br>Results<br>in Math |
|---------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Massachusetts | 56                                  | 49                               | 75                            | 58                         |
| Georgia       | 85                                  | 48                               | 78                            | 32                         |
| Michigan      | 84                                  | 33                               | 75                            | 37                         |
| Colorado      | 64                                  | 38                               | 63                            | 41                         |
| California    | 51                                  | 23                               | 56                            | 29                         |

Table 2

**Percent of 8th Grade Proficient Students – Comparison of State Test Results in Reading and Math to NAEP Test Results**

| State         | State's<br>Results<br>in<br>Reading | NAEP<br>Results<br>in<br>Reading | State's<br>Results<br>in Math | NAEP<br>Results<br>in Math |
|---------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Massachusetts | 75                                  | 43                               | 45                            | 51                         |
| Georgia       | 88                                  | 26                               | 81                            | 25                         |
| Michigan      | 77                                  | 28                               | 64                            | 29                         |
|               |                                     |                                  |                               |                            |

|            |    |    |    |    |
|------------|----|----|----|----|
| Colorado   | 63 | 34 | 46 | 38 |
| California | 42 | 22 | 33 | 24 |

The comparison data in Tables 1 and 2 illustrate that the percentage of students proficient in each state varies dramatically according to the NAEP and that the percentage of students proficient in a given state varies considerably depending on whether we are looking at the state's definition or the national definition. Michigan for example, reported 2 to 3 times as many 4th and 8th grade students proficient in 2007 than the NAEP. Georgia on average reported nearly three times as many students proficient in grades 4 and 8 as did the NAEP, and California nearly twice as many students. In Colorado about 1.5 times as many students were proficient on the state assessments as compared to the NAEP. Massachusetts on average reported similar numbers of students proficient as did the NAEP, suggesting that Massachusetts is the only state in our sample in which proficient students might be meeting national proficiency standards. On the other hand, Michigan and Georgia both fell drastically short in comparison to the NAEP. In general, the findings suggest that that the rigor required to be proficient in each state differs dramatically. Mills (2007) confirms this finding reporting that there are variations in the level of rigor in both the scope of content standards and the meaning of test results.

To further complicate matters, by their very nature standards-based assessments have limitations. The characteristics of the tests themselves can make the process murky with variations in the difficulty of items and the mix of item formats (K. P. Boudett, et. al., 2007). Levels at which performance standards are set depend on multiple factors, including the judgment of the panels assembled to set them and the particular method used to do so. (K. P. Boudett, et. al., 2007). For example in Georgia, student performance standards for the Criterion Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) are established through a standard setting process in which educators from around the state participate. Educators make recommendations on what scores define categories of student performance. As a result of this process, student scores on the CRCT are reported in the following scale scores and performance levels: Below 800 Does Not Meet Expectations, 800-850 Meets Expectations, 850 and higher Exceeds

Expectation, and scores above 900 generally indicate exceptional performance (Georgia Department of Education, 2008).

Similarly, in California the performance levels or cut scaled scores for the state content standards assessments were determined by a group of teachers, school and district level administrators, academics and county office educators in the kindergarten through university arenas. According to members of this group, cut-scores for proficient were determined based on an agreement reached by group consensus. If every state developed proficiency levels like Georgia and California, not only would there be a minimum 50 different definitions of proficient, but the proficiency levels in some states could be deemed irrelevant.

Focusing on California again, part of the problem with the definition may be that cut scaled scores for proficiency are too low. Children in California need only score 350 on state tests to be considered proficient. Since the range of the test is from 150-600, it could be argued that proficient amounts to surprisingly basic levels of performance! According to Fuller et.al. (2006), how cut points are set may increase the mastery of basic domains by low performing students. Additionally, the cut points for determining which students are deemed proficient are set at varying levels across states. Within a given state, cut points also shift over time (Linn, 2001).

Returning to our opening quote on New Jersey state exams, until most recently New Jersey youngsters only had to answer 33% of the state tests correctly to be categorized as proficient. On July 15, 2008, the New Jersey State Board of Education voted to raise the cut scores in grades 5 - 8 for proficiency in reading and math. Now students in those four grades must answer at least 50% of the questions right to be deemed proficient. The state Education Commissioner Lucille Davey was quoted as saying, "What we don't want to do is mask our weaknesses....The incentive may be to have the lowest standard we can, but that won't help our kids" (Mooney, 2008, July 16). The New Jersey State Department of Education is recalculating student scores on the 2008 exams based on the new proficiency cut scores. Up until this point, 76 percent of New Jersey 6th grade students statewide passed the language arts examination (New Jersey Department of Education, 2007; Mooney, 2008, July 16). This number is



expected to drop to 54% after 2008 scores are recalculated (Mooney, 2008, July 21).

## **Conclusion**

The NCLB Act places extreme importance on the narrow yet confounded definition of proficiency, using it to establish the ultimate goal of reforms, sanctions and rewards. Unfortunately, the rigor behind the definition of proficient not only varies widely across the states, but the term has little or no common meaning since proficient can be redefined by each individual state using its own taxonomy. The national and state variations in academic rigor result in a false sense of proficiency for many students.

Since schools face harsh sanctions for not having adequate numbers of students who are proficient, many states are lowering their proficiency standards under NCLB. Teachers in many inner city schools are spending an inordinate amount of time ensuring that kids score proficient in reading and math at the expense of all other subjects (Shakrani, 2007). Yet, in order to compete in a world in which the playing field is leveling, individuals must be multilingual, innovative, and have a global awareness (Friedman, 2005). In essence, students must not only master English language arts and math, but they must be well-rounded, creative and divergent thinkers prepared to compete in a global economy.

If State Departments of Education are purporting to districts and parents that their children are proficient, then the rigor of the exams should at least match those of the NAEP. Consistency in assessment rigor is necessary to ensure that students who are proficient in any state are prepared at minimum to meet challenging achievement standards across the nation.

As congress considers the five-year reauthorization of No Child Left Behind, it must consider the unintended consequences the law has created (Hicok & Ladner, 2007). Congress along with every state departments of education must establish a clear set of national standards, assessments and cut points to be used by all 52 states and other jurisdictions. Congress together with state leaders and policy makers must collectively determine what it means to be proficient in both a national and global setting. The

educational leaders need to determine the domains of study and standards necessary to reach proficiency. This proficiency should not be based on artificial cut scores or a narrow set of domains like reading and math alone, but whether or not children are proficient enough to be productive and thriving citizens in a global society. When the reports go home to parents across the nation telling them that their children are proficient, the meaning of proficient must be ubiquitous and bona fide.

No one would argue with the spirit of No Child Left Behind. All children should have a fair, equal and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency in challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments (NCLB, 2001). To do so, Congress and state policy makers must work together.

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